“Posture of reclining weakness”: Disability and the Courtship Narratives of Jane Austen’s Novels

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Abstract

For years critics have noticed how Jane Austen uses "a cold, a sore throat, a sprained ankle, or some other minor affliction" (Watson 336) to further the plots of her novels. Although the recurring motif of illness appears to be nothing more than the recording of everyday trivialities, the frequent appearance of illness during the courtship narratives is intriguing. The bodily production of modesty requires the conscious display of delicacy; however, delicacy requires disability in order to be visible to society. Similarly, sensibility also requires the display of delicacy and, by extension, disability. Applying Judith Butler's performance theory to disability, it is possible to analyze the performance of delicacy used in both the production of modesty and sensibility, and thereby understand the degree to which delicacy is a learned performance rather than an innate feminine trait. Austen's heroines display varying degrees of affectation of both modesty and sensibility through their performances of delicacy. These performances serve to highlight each heroine's degree of modesty and sensibility, as well as to pique the interest – ideally, although not always successfully – of potential lovers. The performance of disability through delicacy is an essential feature of the temporary invalidism experienced by the heroines during the courtship narratives of Austen's novels.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The field of Jane Austen studies suffers no lack of enthusiasts. A relatively new area in Austen scholarship examines representations of the body. The main concern of the majority of these scholars is the physical body, with a heavy emphasis on the female body as a locus of rebellion, restraint, and repression. Explorations have varied from the social experience of females to the invalid experience of females. Work done by Pamela Steele and John Wiltshire focuses on the presence of illness in the body as a source of social power. Mary Poovey, Jane Nardin, and Christiane Zschrint each explore the inherent paradox of propriety and its effects on the female body in literature, arguing that the feminine body expresses the problems of propriety in Austen's texts. Penelope Joan Fritzer's work draws on the influence of conduct book literature on Austen's works but makes few connections to the female body that is profoundly circumscribed by coded behaviours. Roy Porter's research into medicine and health in the eighteenth century draws attention to the nervous system and its related ailments, which allowed for the medicalization of feminine delicacy, the influence of which can be easily found in Austen's texts. The work done by these scholars has illuminated the work the body does in Austen's texts.

Both Pamela Steele and John Wiltshire argue that illness in Austen's texts is ultimately a form of power controlled by the invalid character in question. Wiltshire's *Jane Austen and the Body* is the most comprehensive account of the body and invalidism in Austen's texts. He argues that the manipulative power held by invalids is essentially a frustrated form of powerlessness. Because the female invalid has no real power, invalidism provides her with temporary power within the family, but ultimately "health is

intimately related to enablement and fulfilment, illness to frustration, anger and defeat" (*Jane Austen* 22). Wiltshire further links invalidism to sensibility by arguing that the community surrounding and perpetuating invalidism ultimately culminates in the culture of sensibility (23). For Wiltshire, Austen is critical both of excessive sensibility resulting in bodily destruction and of extreme bodily control. Likewise, Steele argues that illness is an essential part of Austen's philosophical framework. However, while Wiltshire maintains that illness is linked to "frustration, anger and defeat" ("Jane Austen" 134), Steele finds that illness is associated with the positive aspects of "learning. . . , wisdom and a tender conscience" (152). Invalids, specifically recovering temporary invalids, hold power within their communities because they are believed to be more reflective and moral people as the result of their illnesses. Steele states, "ailments and accidents are not merely useful plot devices, but legitimate illustrations of Austen's themes and logical applications of her philosophy" (152). Real illness becomes a chance for education. While Wiltshire claims that Fanny Price's debility is a critique of male power enacted through her body (108), Steele argues that Fanny's illness is a reaction to improper behaviour that she witnesses at Mansfield Park (158). Although these two scholars appear to disagree as to whether ill health provides education or frustration, good health is ultimately required in order for the former invalids to put their new educations into practice. Both Steele and Wiltshire argue for a link between the invalid body in Austen's texts and Austen's critique of the cultures of propriety and sensibility. Although Steele argues that illness is connected to virtue and Wiltshire states that it is connected to frustration and powerlessness, this thesis argues that the performance of temporary disability through illness is an essential part of the production of modesty, which is

essential to a heroine's success in Austen's courtship narratives.

In order to access the presence of disability in the performances of Austen's heroines, it is necessary to see disability as part of a spectrum. "Ability" connotes health and lack of impairment while "disability" indicates sickness and impairment. In viewing ability and disability as a spectrum, a large grey area of illness and impairment between the two extremes becomes apparent. Illness, or to a lesser degree delicacy, can be seen as a temporary incapacitation and impairment and therefore a form of disability along the spectrum. While Anne de Bourgh's delicate constitution keeps her from appearing in London, Mrs. Bennet's self-diagnosed weak nerves do not appear to hinder her movement within her community. Both women perform as delicate and ill, but to varying degrees. In trying to understand where the line is drawn between illness and disability in the spectrum, it becomes clear that illness and disability are linked.

Within Austen's texts, disability locates itself in the performances of delicacy by the heroines. During their respective courtships, some of Austen's heroines perform delicacy in order to display their modesty and sensibility. This delicacy refers to a general weakness and susceptibility of the heroine, which can lead to illness or impairment. While men in the courtship narratives perform modesty and sensibility as well, it is the feminine performance of delicacy using disability that serves as a catalyst for courtship. In order for feminine modesty and sensibility to be visible to the reader, disability is performed via delicacy. The temporary invalidism of the various heroines speaks to the prominence of the performance of disability in delicacy.

In-depth examinations of the culture of propriety in Austen's texts are found in the works of Poovey, Nardin, and Zschrint. Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman*

Writer thoroughly examines the inherent paradox of feminine propriety. Moralists of the eighteenth century were concerned with female virtue: "The paradox of modesty – and the paradox of female sexuality it simultaneously concealed and revealed – necessarily established the terms in which real women both consciously conceptualized and evaluated their own behaviour and even unconsciously experienced their own gender" (23). Poovey notes that "women seem to exercise their greatest power" (237) in the courtships Austen describes. This power held by women is not, as Wiltshire argues, because of illness (*Jane Austen* 19) but because of their ability to regenerate society from within their own family (Poovey 212). Similarly, Nardin's *Those Elegant Decorums* focuses on Austen's use of irony in her discussions of propriety:

> Irony and morality are far from being irreconcilable elements in her work, for in fact her ironic sense of the irresolvable incongruity between pretence and actuality, the way things are and the way they ought to be, is always employed in the service of morality as she conceived it. Typically she examines moral platitudes in the light of her own sharp ironic perceptions of reality; she rejects what she must, but affirms what she can. (2)

In her analysis of *Pride and Prejudice*, Nardin shows that Austen departs from absolute adherence to propriety when common sense should take precedence (16). In *Pride and Prejudice* there is a clear distinction made between "moral rules of propriety, which must be obeyed, and rules which are only matters of fashion or convenience, and which may therefore be violated if common sense so dictates" (16). Nardin also tracks an evolution in Austen's handling and use of propriety in her texts (16-7). *Persuasion* yields no easy

answers, and instead examines "two contrasting standards of propriety" (Nardin 17). Overall, Nardin's analysis focuses on the various forms of propriety and the subsequent departures from it in Austen's texts. Both Poovey and Nardin examine Austen's use of propriety in her texts as a reaction to its inherent paradox. That is, Austen draws attention to the paradox of characters having to affect propriety in order to appear to have unaffected propriety. Zschrint applies the paradox of propriety to the trope of fainting in the various courtship narratives of the eighteenth century. Fainting allows heroines to remain essentially pure in mind, as they simultaneously make a sexual conquest. Zschrint argues that fainting indicates a heightened emotional response and that this higher susceptibility to emotions is a key characteristic of the culture of sensibility. Austen, however, does not allow even her most delicate heroine – Fanny Price – to faint (Zschrint, "Fainting" 57). None of Austen's heroines in her mature courtship narratives faints, which would have allowed them to remain pure and modest in the face of sexuality. Poovey and Nardin do not connect propriety to the invalid body as thoroughly as has Zschrint. All three scholars, however, connect propriety to Austen's courtship narratives.

Penelope Joan Fritzer's *Jane Austen and Eighteenth-Century Courtesy Books* provides a detailed account of Austen's use of conduct book literature in her texts. Building on the work of Poovey and the paradox of propriety, Fritzer further explores how and why Austen's heroines diverge from proper conduct book behaviour. She notes that Elizabeth, in *Pride and Prejudice*, departs from "the letter of courtesy book behaviour, but never from the spirit; her innate good sense and taste never allow her, in her departures from courtesy rules, to become vulgar like Lydia" (54). Austen, according

to Fritzer, "is generally in accord with courtesy book advice and behaviour. . . . [and] where there is a deviation, it is always in the service of 'deep' manners, or social or individual good" (6-7). Like Poovey and Nardin, Fritzer examines Austen's depiction of propriety in the heroines as a didactic tool. Fritzer argues, as Steele does, that illness acts as a restorative to moderation and propriety (82-3). In all, Fritzer argues, like Nardin and Poovey, that Austen's heroines depart from the strict rule of propriety in order to show flaws in conduct book literature.

The social acceptance of delicacy and sensibility during the eighteenth century resulted in the body being responsible for the performance of propriety, but an understanding of delicacy and sensibility came out of the growing research into nerves by the medical community. The most comprehensive research concerning health and medicine in the eighteenth century has been done Roy Porter. His examinations include quackery, mental health, the nervous system, and medical pamphlets. Porter carefully traces the movement of medical theory into social consciousness through widely distributed pamphlets and medical treatises, as well as through historical accounts of medical cases. In his examination of George III, Porter notes that the heightened sensibility and the individuality which accompanied such a distinction encouraged the upper-class public to adopt George III's excuse that "I'm nervous, I'm not ill, but I'm nervous" (*Mind Forg'd* 13) to assert their own individuality and separation from the lower, working classes. Heightened sensibility and individuality were sought after as signs of upper-class delicacy; therefore, "fashionable physicians flattered melancholy" (86) – that is, a diagnosis of heightened sensibility – to their elite patients. In addition to examining the evolution of the theory of nerves, Porter examines the nature of illness in

the eighteenth century. Porter writes that popular medical theory held that

> the idle, the feckless, and the debauched were those who were expected to succumb to disease – perhaps including the idle rich no less than the improvident poor. Many diseases seemed like self-inflicted punishments, above all, of course, venereal infections and mental maladies – often the one was seen to lead to the other. (*In Sickness* 72)

The body was, during the eighteenth century, "far more than a mere carcass. It was an instrument of communication, a weapon of war, an expressive medium of the self, the prime symbol of class, status, and gender" (56). Porter also notes that even though the pursuit of beauty was physically destructive, the beauty of a pale cheek was vital in order to communicate purity and modesty within the culture of propriety (54).

Further connections between the cultures of propriety and sensibility and the emerging medical discourse in popular culture need to be made in relation to the literary heroines of Austen's courtship narratives. Although Wiltshire and Steele have explored power relationships and the body, questions remain surrounding the temporary invalidism that nearly all of Austen's heroines encounter during their respective courtships. The work of Poovey, Nardin, and Zschrint illustrates Austen's departures from the culture of propriety, but extensive work still needs to be done concerning how these departures affect the courtships of Austen's heroines. Although Fritzer examines conduct book literature of the eighteenth century, little has been done with the temporary invalidism of the various heroines.

Eighteenth-century developments concerning the theory of the human nervous system influenced the ideas of both the cultures of propriety and sensibility. Porter points

out that "the nervous system had, of course, been familiar ever since Antiquity. But during the eighteenth century, it had acquired a dominant role in medical theorizing through the new fascination with the reflexes, sensation, and irritability" (*In Sickness* 69). Although the presence of nerves as part of human physiology had been suspected for centuries, the eighteenth century saw the movement towards ascribing specific medical conditions, such as hysteria and melancholy, to the nervous system. This medical "discovery" of nerves eventually led to the diagnosis and medicalization of nervous conditions, which were marks of superiority

> amongst the more refined ladies of the nation – the "English milady" readily fell victim to the "English malady". Ladies suffered disturbance because their feelings were so readily touched. The fair sex, it was alleged, would even aspire to the vapours or hysteria, to prove their superiority and capture attention. (*Mind Forg'd* 105)

The culture of sensibility, which had a fervent hold in England during the latter half of the eighteenth century, applied the ideas of nerves and nervous conditions to "the aggrandizement of feeling and its investment with moral value" (Barker-Benfield xix). Weak nerves and deep sensibility became linked within the culture of sensibility as an expression of delicacy. As a result, an ideal femininity developed that conflicted with the prevailing ideal described by such conduct book writers as Hannah More, James Fordyce, and William Cobbett.[1] As the conduct book writers became more familiar with the role of nerves and the nervous system within the body, and increasingly horrified by the

[1] Austen was familiar with the writings of More, Fordyce, and Cobbet, having made reference to them in her letters and novels; therefore, these three conduct book writers merit inclusion here.

indulgence and affectation of nervous susceptibility through the culture of sensibility, they saw nerves and nervous disorders as a physical manifestation of inner moral turmoil. While health and healthiness had long preoccupied conduct book writers, as there was a perceived link between physical health and moral condition, the emergence of "nerves" as a source of female delicacy aided the late eighteenth-century conduct book writers in their efforts to outline the ideal education and conduct of young women. Conduct book writers caution their readers strongly against the powerful culture of sensibility, which gained its power and authority from the eighteenth century's better understanding of the nervous system. Instead, conduct book writers encouraged adherence to the ideals of feminine propriety, as opposed to those of affected sensibility. While conduct book writers present a specific ideal of accepted femininity for their readers, Jane Austen's novels provide an alternative to both the culture of propriety's and the culture of sensibility's ideals of femininity, exposing the faults in both cultures' depiction of femininity. The actions of Austen's heroines explore conflicting ideals of femininity through her depictions of femininity in her texts. Through the representations of heroines' temporary invalidism in courtship and the performance by other characters of delicacy, Austen illustrates the inherent contradictions and paradoxes within the feminine ideal of both conduct book literature and the culture of sensibility. Moreover, the necessity of disability in the performance of both modesty and sensibility is revealed through the courtship narratives in Austen's novels.

The cultures of propriety and sensibility both found support from the medical community of the eighteenth century; more specifically, health was believed to be indicative of a moral state. Appearance of health, therefore, was vital in order to prove a

pure moral state. Those who drink too much were guilty of the sin of gluttony, and for the medical theorists of the eighteenth century, this immoral state could be seen in the medical complications that followed. Ideally, through the sinner's invalidism, a person would realise his or her error and temper any future behaviour. The delicacy that emerged from these ideally reformed characters was sought after as a marker of deep understanding and sensibility. The appearance of a healthy body became equated with moral purity.

George Cheyne's *The English Malady* gives a detailed description of nervous ailments and explanations of the causes of those affected by with melancholy. As the very appearance of health was a reflection of one's nerves, Cheyne writes that "the Healthy and Virtuous should thereby be growing continually healthier and happier, and the Bad continually becoming more miserable and unhealthy, till their Punishment forced them upon Virtue and Temperance; for Virtue and Happiness are literally and really Cause and Effect" (18-9). As weak nerves were believed to be hereditary, and thereby the fault of immoral parents, "a poor Creature, born subject to Nervous Distempers, has no more Reason to complain than a Child, whose Father has spent his worldly fortune, and left him poor, and destitute" (14). Good could come out of weak nerves and ill health: "it is a Misfortune indeed, to be born with weak Nerves. . . . [I]t is (or ought to be) a Fence and Security against the Snares and Temptations to which the Robust and Healthy are expos'd" (14). While chronic ill health because of poor nerves is believed to be punishment for intemperate and immoral behaviour, weak nerves are also a chance to avoid the moral pitfalls of the healthy. Even though weak nerves point to the possibility of madness, as with George III, the ability for more reflection and sensibility makes weak

nerves a valuable commodity in the developing culture of sensibility, as well as for the culture of propriety. But while the culture of propriety focused on the invalid's chance for reflection and moral development, the culture of sensibility focused on the invalid's heightened delicacy and individualism. Lapses into nervousness and melancholy quickly became, therefore, markers of a more reflective and modest character, but also markers of delicacy.

Delicacy, which emerged out of the theory of weak nerves, became fashionable because it allowed women to appear reflective, sensible, and moral. In his *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke gives a brief statement on true delicacy in women: "The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it" (179). True delicacy, like sensibility, was praised by conduct book writers within the culture of propriety; however, affected delicacy and affected weak nerves allowed women to appear more delicate and with a deeper sensibility than they truly possessed. These affected women were assumed to be more reflective than healthy women due to their weak, albeit affected, nerves, and this individualistic difference captured more attention from potential suitors (Porter, *Mind Forg'd* 105).

In an effort to ensure that young women did not begin to affect delicacy, conduct book literature instructed young women in the culture of propriety. Widely successful conduct book writers such as More and Fordyce perpetuated the ideal of femininity expected from the culture of propriety in an effort to keep young women from the culture of sensibility. Zshrint points out "the code of delicacy relied on an idealized conception of femininity describing women in terms of virtue, delicacy, modesty, and propriety"

(52). Although women were idealized in this way, they were still seen to be in constant moral peril due to their "greater fragility; and this weakness, natural and moral, clearly points out the necessity of a superior degree of caution, retirement, and reserve" (More, *Essays* 4). Women were required to practice greater bodily restraint than men in order to maintain the appearance of chastity. This emphasis on a "superior degree" of bodily control is because of the belief that that "women are fundamentally sexual" (Poovey 19) and that this sexuality is dangerous and needs to be controlled. In other words, women who want to appear unaffectedly proper and chaste still need to affect propriety, which creates a paradox. This control takes the outward form of propriety and is performed through her body via restraint, allowing her to maintain the appearance of a virtuous and moral character. As More explains in *Essays on Various Subjects*, "the women of this country were not sent into the world to shun society, but to embellish it; they were not designed for wilds and solitudes, but for the amiable and endearing offices of social life. They have useful stations to fill, and important characters to sustain" (35). A woman who thought herself to be a wit ran the risk of being characterized as a "vain and petulant girl" (46). Therefore, when a woman was placed in a situation where she would be conversing with men, More advised that, if a woman had any learning or knowledge, she should "never make an ostentatious parade of it, because she will rather be intent on acquiring more, than on displaying what she has" (38). A woman's decorum and courtesy in public and private are seen as representative of her deeper character, and as such, her outward appearance was thought to mirror her inner personality.

Late eighteenth-century conduct book literature focused on good health and moral character, both of which would be reflected in a woman's modesty and propriety.

Fordyce describes the ideal wife:

> As she is quick in her orders to those about her, so she bestirs herself with the utmost activity, declining no pains or exertions proportioned to her strength, which is increased by constant exercise, and which, with the chearfulness [sic], expedition, and utility that attend it, she prefers to all the decorations and delicacy of indolent beauty. (165-66)

For Fordyce, therefore, the ideal woman does not aspire to the affectation of weak nerves but instead maintains a happy character. This pleasant character is mirrored in her body, which is not content to languish on the sofa. The pyschological is reflected in the physical and vice versa. The connection between health and immorality, namely indulgence, is prominent in Cobbett's *Advice to Young Men and (Incidentally) to Young Women* in 1830. Cobbett argues that depression is the fault of those who have "indulged in unnecessary enjoyments" (59), and that ill health is the fault of those who indulge in too many warm liquids and "slops" (28). The lax moral character led, for Cobbett, to the delicate health epitomized by the English malady. Cobbett goes on to describe a proper wife, careful at all times to underline the importance of moderation and the danger of indulgence, as indulgence would, according to Cobbett's logic, lead directly to illness. As G.J. Barker-Benfield outlines, female bodily constraints were considered necessary because of the development of the "new social standard of 'politeness' named 'delicacy'" (290). In accordance with this new standard, which "included restrained movement…, not naming body's functions… or even parts… in public" (290), conduct book writers "pushed inexorably against women's uninhibitedly expressing appetite" (290). While good health is praised, indulgent and unrestrained behaviour indicates a lack of propriety

and is therefore seen as morally dangerous. The link between moral worth and health is a constant force throughout the eighteenth century.

The need for female bodily restraint resulted in the paradox of propriety. The fear of indulgent behaviour and uninhibited appetites leading to moral decay and ill health is rooted, for women, in the seventeenth-century belief that "female receptivity… can rapidly degenerate into sexual appetite" (Poovey 18). The fear of the sexual female was picked up by eighteenth-century conduct book writers who "described femininity as innate. . . [but] insisted that feminine virtues needed constant cultivation" (15). In Wetenhall Wilkes's *A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady*, Wilkes extols chastity as the best of all virtues, and defines it as "a suppression of all irregular desires, voluntary pollutions, sinful concupiscence, and of an immoderate use of all sensual, or carnal pleasures" (30). This constant conscious suppression of so-called "irregular desires" led to the performance of modesty. Poovey states that "given the voraciousness that female desire was assumed to have, the surest safeguard against overindulgence was not to allow or admit to appetites of any kind. Thus women were encouraged to display no vanity, no passion, no assertive 'self' at all" (21). By assuming women to be innately sexual creatures, conduct book literature demanded that women consciously suppress their knowledge by appearing to be utterly innocent and ignorant of any knowledge of their sexuality:

> Equating chastity with value not only required a woman to suppress or sublimate her sexual and emotional appetites; it also required her to signal her virtue by a physical intactness that is by definition invisible. In reality she could display her chastity only indirectly or – even more precisely –

> negatively: by *not* speaking, by *not* betraying the least consciousness of her essential sexuality. (Poovey 23-4)

In this way, a woman's modesty is an indicator of her sexuality, which in turn indicates to potential suitors the presence of a sexual being. John Gregory, in *A Father's Legacy to his Daughters*, maintains that "one of the chief beauties in a female character, is that modest reserve, that retiring delicacy, which avoids the public eye, and is disconcerted even at the gaze of admiration" (57). Furthermore, "an immodest woman is a kind of monster, distorted from its proper form" (Wilkes 30). To be assertive and individualistic is, according to conduct book writers, immodest and vulgar; however, the culture of sensibility embraces individualism and indulgence.

In Austen's courtship plots, a bout of temporary invalidism, a weakness in health, and a heightened sensibility appear to be necessary for courtship to occur but are in direct conflict with conduct book literature and the culture of propriety. This weakness in nerves points towards the culture of sensibility against which the conduct book writers, such as More and Cobbett, frequently warn their readers. In response to young women who affected sentimental sensibility, More writes that "this refined jargon, which has infested letters and tainted morals, is chiefly admired and adopted by young ladies of a certain turn, who read sentimental books, write sentimental letters, and contract sentimental friendships" (*Essays* 78-9). In her *Strictures on the Modern System of Female Education*, More writes that

> another class of contemporary authors turned all the force of their talents to excite emotions, inspire sentiment, and to reduce all mental and moral excellence into sympathy and feeling. These softer qualities were elevated

> at the expense of principle; and young women were incessantly hearing unqualified sensibility extolled as the perfection of their nature; till those who really possessed this amiable quality, instead of directly, and chastising, and restraining it, were in danger of fostering it to their hurt, and began to consider themselves as deriving their excellence from its excess; while those less interesting damsels, who happened not to find any of this amiable sensibility in their hearts, but thought it creditable to have it somewhere, fancied its seat was in the nerves; and here indeed it was easily found or feigned; till a false and excessive display of feeling became so predominant, as to bring in question the actual existence of that true tenderness, without which, though a woman may be worthy, she can never be amiable. (73-4)

Although true sensibility was believed to exist, and was thought an admirable characteristic in women, affected sensibility was, according to conduct book writers, being mistaken for the real thing. More is in agreement with Mary Wollstonecraft on this point. In her discussion of modesty, Wollstonecraft addresses the dangers of "sensibility that is not tempered by reflection" (134). Ideally, sensibility should aid modesty in order to make

> the heart. . . . beat time to humanity, rather than throb with love. The woman who has dedicated a considerable portion of her time to pursuits purely intellectual, and whose affections have been exercised by humane plans of usefulness, must have more purity of mind, as a natural consequence, than the ignorant beings whose time and thoughts have been

occupied by gay pleasures or schemes to conquer hearts. (126)

Although she admits that "the downcast eye, the rosy blush, the retiring grace, are all proper in their season" (134), true sensibility requires a "soberness of mind" (134). Real sensibility is tempered by reflection, but the culture of sensibility requires sensibility to be encouraged and displayed. Affected sensibility thereby deflates the value of true, restrained sensibility.

This heightened delicacy, which is more in line with the culture of sensibility and at odds with contemporary conduct literature, is part of Austen's heroines' refashioning of the ideal of propriety. In fact, the temporary state of weakness has a strong connection to the overindulgence of sensibility, which was also highly criticised by conduct book writers. Barker-Benfield writes that sensibility itself "signified revolution, promised freedom, threatened subversion, and became convention. The word denoted the receptivity of the senses and referred to the psychoperceptual scheme explained and systematized by Newton and Locke. It connoted the operation of the nervous system, the material basis for consciousness" (xvii). More was critical of sentimentalism and these feelings created out of the culture of sensibility, and also of sentiment's effect on young women. "Sentiment," she writes, "is the varnish of virtue to conceal the deformity of vice; and it is not uncommon for the same persons to make a jest of religion, to break through the most solemn ties and engagements, to practise every art of latent fraud and open seduction, and yet to value themselves on speaking and writing sentimentally" (*Essays* 78). In conduct book literature, such indulgence in sentimentality and sensibility, without proper use of reason to guide their feelings and restraint to guide their bodies, decreases the chance of young women acting with appropriate propriety and reason.

While conduct book literature maintains that chronic illness and delicacy could be signs of weak morals and an overdeveloped sensibility, delicate nerves are still seen by men as being highly desirable. Barker-Benfield explains that the "refinement of delicate nerves made women liable to sickness; so this liability of sensibility also became a sexualized characteristic, like other signs of vulnerability – kneeling, say – one arousing men" (345). In short, "men were turned on by women's making themselves dependent" (345). By languishing on the sofa, the woman displays her unrestrained body. Weakness and sensibility allow women to show their delicacy without having to repress and control their sexuality rather than displaying the modest demeanour demanded by the culture of propriety. Martha Stoddard Holmes explains that "the novel amply affirms the power of infirmity to draw people close, not only in parent-child or sibling relationships, but also in same-sex relationships (female and male) and in heterosexual courting couples, where it catalyzes rather than precludes marriages" (52). Rather than excluding them from the marriage market, the delicate, overly sensible heroine sees her chances of marriage heightened because of her temporary invalidism.

Heightened sensibility seems to be in direct contrast, however, to the concept of propriety of the conduct books, which warn against courting and marrying women with delicate nerves or suspect moral characters. At the same time, performances of heightened sensibility in literature make a young woman more appealing to potential suitors. As Zschirnt explains,

> the image of the highly sensitive, susceptible woman overcome by her emotions, collapsing into an easy chair, leaning on the arm of a worried female friend, or falling on the breast of her future lover is certainly the

> most eloquent and the most enduring symbol of the cult of sensibility that dominated the literary scene of the second half of the eighteenth century. Fainting indicated physical fragility, vulnerability, and infirmity; but of equal importance, it referred to a mental state and hence epitomized sensibility's notion of a heightened perceptibility and emotionality in women. (48)

What makes the dependant, invalid woman appealing to men is the fact that this woman becomes sexually vulnerable and available, or, in Austen's texts, ready for courtship. As Zschrint continues, the fainting fit

> rather described her in a state of mind that enabled her to perform the self-contradictory act of unwittingly pursuing a goal: the initiation of her own marriage. As a consequence, literary fainting was essentially paradoxical. Signaling states of temporary loss of consciousness, the fainting fits marked crucial moments that decided the heroine's future. (48)

Fainting allowed women to remain innocent and modest while faced with the sexual advances of courtship, while at the same time displaying their sexual vulnerability. The use of temporary invalidism within courtship was the subject of early criticism by Austen,

> who mocked Richardson's invention in her burlesque *Frederique and Elfrida*: A young lady has recourse to fainting to force the reluctant hero into a proposal of marriage and 'was in such a hurry to have a succession of fainting-fits, that she had scarcely patience enough to recover from one before she fell into another' (*Catherine* 10). (54)

Clearly critical of fainting and affected heroines, Austen's later heroines are courted because of each heroines' temporary bout of invalidism. The transgressions made by Austen's heroines against the culture of propriety, which should have excluded them from successful courtship and decent society, instead result in marriage.

Austen's novels of courtship are also novels of health. As J.R. Watson points out, "ever since Scott, critics have noted Jane Austen's skill in the use of trivialities; and on several occasions in her novels, the plot is forwarded by a cold, a sore throat, a sprained ankle, or some other minor affliction" (336). On the surface, the incidental illnesses of Austen's heroines seem to be nothing more than a clever use of illness, but there is a reworking of the culture of propriety at work. Poovey explains that

> for the most part, women writers [of sentimental fiction] were scrupulous about fulfilling the office of educator, and, as a consequence, their novels often echo conduct books almost verbatim, stressing self-control and self-denial to the exclusion of psychological complexity and attributing almost all initiative to the evil characters rather than to the heroines. (38)

Austen's novels, however, resist a simple moralistic reading. Instead, the reader is forced to confront "the moral complexities of these societies" (Poovey 44). This subtle rejection of typical conduct book morality gives Austen's heroines a certain degree of assertiveness, or agency. Typically in sentimental fiction, "forbidden by convention to declare their desires, the heroines must struggle, often ineffectually, to communicate by indirection or even deceit, and the interest of the plot lies in the nuances of frustration and achievement that mark their efforts" (43). While the heroines are unable, by convention, to initiate their courtships verbally, as this would be considered immodest and a clear

signal of impurity, heroines instead use temporary invalidism to begin the courtship rituals. The long tradition of fainting heroines attests to this. Even Austen's earlier female characters fainted regularly because of their affected sensibility, although in Austen's case, the fainting heroines are more objects of mockery than pity. In "Love and Friendship," Sophia's frequent fainting in the rain (119) results in her "galloping consumption" (121). On her deathbed, Sophia warns Laura about the dangers of affected fainting fits: "Beware of fainting fits. . . Though at the time they may be refreshing and agreeable, yet believe me they will, in the end, if too often repeated and at improper seasons, prove destructive to your constitution. . . . Run mad as often as you choose; but do not faint" ("Love and Friendship" 122). The conscious performance of delicacy and sensibility through fainting is clear from Sophia's warning, which implies that she could control the amount and timing of her fainting fits. Similarly, Austen's later heroines have sudden headaches, dangerous falls, overall nervous weaknesses, and nagging colds at the same moment that their respective romantic interests are nearby, but they do not faint. After the woman recovers, courtship continues, and almost always results in marriage. But unlike the previous fainting heroines of literature, Austen's heroines are not ignorant of their sexual desires and most heroines actively resist the trappings of the culture of sensibility.

The image of the young woman languishing on the sofa is common within the culture of sensibility; however, the same image is scorned by conduct book writers and the culture of propriety. Because the language of nerves and nervousness had entered the vernacular, many female literary characters claimed to be invalids as a result of their weak nerves. Such characters, such as Mrs. Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, with her

famous "poor nerves," affect a high degree of sensibility by feigning weak nerves to display their upper-class delicacy. Such displays were in opposition to conduct book writers who decried artifice and affectation, arguing that "it is better to run the risk of being thought ridiculous than disgusting" (Gregory 47). Although Austen's heroines Marianne and Fanny rest on sofas, they avoid complete adherence to the culture of sensibility, and by the end of *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne has attempted to reposition herself within the culture of propriety.

The following chapter discusses the performances of various physical invalids, and focuses on how invalidism is described by the narrator and performed by the characters. Austen's novels contain a variety of invalids, so their performances vary. A review of Judith Butler's performance theory applies itself to disability, and provides an avenue to discuss the conscious construction of delicacy, propriety, and invalidism by Austen's heroines. Conduct book literature examines the link between propriety and physical delicacy, as well as the importance of blushing to illustrate mental delicacy. Following this, there is an examination of specific examples from various texts: Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*, as an example of chronic invalidism and the resulting reflective personality; Mrs. Bertram of *Mansfield Park*, as an example of affected delicacy; Anne Elliot of *Persuasion*, as an example of reflective delicacy and resigning modesty; Mary Musgrove of *Persuasion*, as an example of consciously constructed invalidism; Mrs. Smith of *Persuasion*, as an example of the ideal literary invalid; and Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, as an example of impropriety schooled through illness.

The third chapter describes Austen's treatment of sensibility and her temporarily invalid heroines, and focuses of the necessity of delicacy through heightened sensibility

in the courtship narratives. An examination of the origins and criticisms of the culture of sensibility provides a context for further discussion of delicacy. Conduct book literature exposes the flaws inherent in the culture of sensibility, yet falls short of completely condemning the sensibility itself, which the conduct book writers see as a necessary part of female propriety. Following the examination of sensibility and conduct book literature, there is an examination of various temporary invalids from the courtship narratives: Jane Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, as an example of temporary invalidism proving her delicacy; Elizabeth Bennet of *Pride and Prejudice*, as an example of delicacy providing an opportunity for courtship; Fanny Price of *Mansfield Park*, as an example of temporary invalidism resulting in male attention; Anne de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice*, as an example of consciously-fostered delicacy not resulting in marriage; and Marianne Dashwood of *Sense and Sensibility*, as an example of the dangers of sensibility and delicacy.

Chapter Two: Performances

Praise for performances of ability and censure for affected disability can be found throughout conduct book literature and sensibility literature. According to conduct book writers, women should act in a modest fashion when in the company of men (Gregory 59-60), thereby giving women the appearance, if not the reality, of delicacy (58). Eighteenth-century critics of the culture of sensibility claim that women feign invalidism as an extension of their natural weakness in order to hide their lack of true delicacy and modesty. Since a woman's modesty and delicacy were traditionally the markers by which a woman's worth could be evaluated, invalidism became a clever way to display delicacy without having to perform propriety in the expected fashion by, for example, singing or dancing.

It is useful to pause for moment in order to discuss what is meant by performance, ability, and disability. By performance, I refer to the bodily acts and utterances by Austen's characters. These acts and utterances serve to demarcate a character's position on the spectrum between ability and disability. These performances carry cultural weight as they point to the character's delicacy. Similar to the nature of disability, Austen's heroines move from abled to disabled along a spectrum. In most cases, Austen's heroines use disability in their performance of delicacy. Unaffected delicacy aids the heroines in their respective courtships, but affected delicacy marks the heroines as ridiculous. Austen's heroines perform delicacy through temporary invalidism; that is, the heroines become temporarily disabled in their environments. Although there are permanent invalids whose delicacy is unaffected, they remain on the periphery of the courtship narratives. Delicacy needs disability in order to be visible. In other words, for delicacy

to be performed, there must also be a performance of disability. These performances are, at their core, learned behaviours that have been internalised and mistaken as natural and innate. The terms "ability" and "disability" refer back to performance, as the character's body performs ability or disability. In the case of Austen's heroines, performances of ability are those acts that mark the body as healthy, while performances of disability mark the body as delicate and different. In Austen's novels, the performances of disability allow for the performances of both modesty and sensibility through the performance of delicacy.

Traditionally, a literary invalid's performance sends a specific message through a set of coded behaviours. The message is that of delicacy, and certain behaviours serve to illustrate its existence. These behaviours were played out everywhere from the stage, such as those found in Molière's play *The Imaginary Invalid*, to fiction, such as Scott's fictional utopia of *Millennium Hall*, to medical treatises, such as Cheyne's *The English Malady*. In *The Imaginary Invalid*, Argan is a hypochondriac who uses his status as an invalid to manipulate those around him. In an exchange with Toinette, Argan explains his reasoning in forcing his daughter to marry a doctor:

> ARGAN: Reason? I'm sick and feeble. I'd like to have a son-in-law and relatives in the medical profession. I'd like to have the help I need to fight my illnesses: to handle the consultations, diagnoses, prescriptions, medicines. And from inside the family. (21)

Yet in spite of his great illness, Argan is able to chase Toinette around the room. Toinette tells Argan to "remember you're sick" (23), a line that highlights not only Argan's absurdity, but also his deviance from the expected performance of a real invalid.

Unlike Argan, Mrs. Trentham's performance of invalidism in *Millennium Hall* follows the culturally scripted path. Mrs. Trentham, who is disfigured because of smallpox, rediscovers "her love of reading," as well as regaining "the quiet happiness of which flutter and dissipation had deprived her" (241), as a result of her illness and subsequent recovery. When a heroine falls ill, she is expected to be listless, feverish, and prone to fainting, as is the case with Marianne Dashwood. She is to remain on the sofa or in bed and to cultivate a more reflective nature. Lousia Musgrove, whose fall from the Cobb in *Persuasion* forces her to evaluate and reflect on her past behaviour, follows the script of penitent invalid literary characters. When she recovers, Louisa is expected to return to the performance of propriety and delicacy, marking her as a modest, delicate woman. Louisa cultivates a taste for poetry, becomes a proper lady, and marries the reflective and melancholy Benwick, whom she had previously ignored. The performances of delicacy by these characters are displayed and seen through a series of culturally understood acts, thereby marking them as invalids.

Although performances of ability and disability occur in Austen's texts, the performances of disability by the various invalids are most intriguing. While there are permanent invalids peppered throughout her works, the most notable being Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*, performances of disability are not limited to these characters. Temporary disability allows for the performances of delicacy and modesty, two virtues which eighteenth-century society believed would protect a woman's greatest virtue, her virginity. In Austen's texts, performances of disability, which come through the performance of modesty, are sometimes met with sincerity, but other times greeted with comedy by family and society. Austen's heroines expose the degree to which the

performance of disability is an essential part of the performance of modesty.

The definition of disability is contentious and relies on the perspective of the model, be it medical or social. During the eighteenth century, disability was defined as a "want of power" (Johnson 63) within the body, which assumes that ability is the presence of power. The belief that disability equates with incapacity on the part of the individual is still present within the modern medical model. The medical model assumes the existence of a normal functioning body and therefore classifies bodies as disabled that differ from the assumed norm. This binary of abled and disabled treats the able body as the standard, which devalues the disabled body. In 1980, the World Health Organisation attempted to define disability in *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps*, but the WHO definition assumes that a normal human being exists (Williams 128). The result of the *ICIDH* was a split within the disability theory community,

> marking the divide between those who see disability as an emergent property of the interaction between person and society and those who see it as an expression of social oppression. For the latter, medicine, social security, charity, social work, occupational therapy, and so on are all engaged in an ideological practice that defines disability in ways in which it becomes – in the final analysis – a property of the individual rather than a feature of society. (134)

The *ICIDH* definition is particularly helpful as it clearly points to the tension between the two models of disability. The social model is useful when dealing with disability in literature. Discussion continues in the Disability Studies community as to how the term

"disability" should be defined, although most within the community agree that the social model of disability is a far more accurate representation than the medical model. The medical model demands a hierarchy of ability by labelling differing body types as deviant, disabled, and deformed, and therefore in need of correction and cure, rather than inclusion. Although the medical model has been scrutinized by the Disability Studies community, the desire for cures is still present in the larger society. This desire can be clearly seen in the controversy surrounding cochlear implants for the Deaf.[2] The Deaf community has traditionally objected to cochlear implants, arguing instead that "deafness is not a disability" (Davis 881) anymore than "the inability to speak English is a disability" (882). According to Lennard Davis, "the Deaf feel that their culture, language, and community constitute a totally adequate, self-enclosed, and self-defining sub-nationality within the larger structure of the audist state" (881-82). The medical community, however, sees deafness as a physical defect that needs to be fixed. The discrimination implicit in the medical model makes it wholly unsuitable for examining disability and the experience of those living with disabilities in the world as it makes the disability synonymous with the individual in question. According to the medical model, deafness is the property of the Deaf person, not of the society that cannot communicate with the Deaf individual. The medical model fails to represent the concept of disability as the production of society, and this failing makes the medical model limited when discussing disability and its various representations in literature.

In the social model, disability is seen as a social construct that is built out of our

[2] The Deaf argue that their distinct language and culture marks them as a separate, cohesive and culturally distinct group within society, thereby ceasing to be "deaf" in the disabled sense and becoming "Deaf" in the cultural sense.

collective experiences. As an able-bodied community, we have decided to perform our daily acts and rituals in a certain way. We label people as "disabled" when their performances deviate from our accepted norm. Within the greater hearing community, deaf people are viewed as disabled. However, when a hearing person enters a Deaf community, it is the hearing person who is disabled. This reversal occurs because the hearing person is unable to perform basic functions, such as communicating in American Sign Language, and is therefore a deviation from the norm. The performances of a hearing person are completely out of step with the collective performances of Deaf people. Ability and disability are, therefore, less about medical diagnosis and more about human experience and performance within a community. Since disability cannot confine itself to the medical model, and comes of a lived experience, disability can be seen as rooted in the daily interactions between our bodies and our environment.

From the social model of disability comes the concept of disability as a continuum rather than as a binary. Within the category of disability there are degrees of severity based on the degree to which a person is able to perform. A person may move from being abled to disabled, or from disabled to abled, within his or her lifetime. Furthermore, a person with a disability can pass in society by performing as an able-bodied person. Is a person still disabled if he or she is, like the Deaf who use ASL, able to live in a hearing society? No longer is a person abled or disabled; instead, a person is situated on a continuum of ability and disability dependant upon his or her interaction with the environment. This is the position on disability theory I have taken in this thesis.

In order to further the understanding of disability in literature, it is necessary to look at its performative aspects. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson points out, "disability

is a culturally fabricated narrative of the body, similar to what we understand as the fictions of race and gender" (77). With regard to Austen, it is important to look at the performative aspect of disability in order to gain a clearer understanding of how disability makes the cultural performance of delicacy visible in the courtship narratives. By applying Butler's performance theory to disability, it is possible to see the performative aspects of disability, thereby revealing its cultural construction. Butler examines the cultural fabrication of gender in *Gender Trouble*. Her analysis of the necessary performativity of gender is essential to understanding the performativity of disability.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that "gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (43-4). Butler's theory goes beyond cultural constructions of gender and looks at the performances involved in the social creation of gender. For Butler,

> various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all. Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions – and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in them; the construction "compels" our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (178)

After these performances are repeated numerous times, the performances are mistaken for the gender identity itself: "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its

results" (33). Gender, as a social construct, disappears into a network of performances. As a result, it is possible to challenge these supposedly gendered performances, as Butler's example of drag shows. Once the binary of masculine and feminine is exploded, a spectrum of performances becomes possible and inevitable.

Butler develops the theory that gender is entirely performative because "genders can be neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent, neither original nor derived" (180). Being a woman is not, according to Butler, solely a genetic destiny. Rather, "being" a woman is the result of a set of performances which signal to the world a person's gender. The problem with this theory is that making gender strictly performative negates the possibility of innate gender, which aligns Butler with those who argue nurture over nature. A woman's so-called natural inclination to have children is not biological destiny, but is a socially constructed performance. This emphasis on nurture rather than nature makes the application of performance theory to disability somewhat problematic, as disability is the result of both the environment and nurture.

Butler addresses the idea of using performance theory to examine race, but hesitates from endorsing the crossover. Arguing that "race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies" (xvi), Butler proposes that "the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race" (xvi). Although performance theory can help explore aspects of race, it is not a perfect fit. Similarly, performance theory can illuminate aspects of disability in literature, but the theory's emphasis on nurture over nature falls apart with certain aspects of disability. For example, Mrs. Smith cannot walk because of a "severe rheumatic fever" (*Persuasion* 173) in her legs. She does not choose

to perform rheumatic fever, but the representation of her bodily performances is understood as containing the cultural meanings of disability. Just as gender may be understood as the representation of a series of culturally imposed performances that tend to naturalize the concept of feminine and masculine, so disability in literature may be understood from the point of view of the social model to be a representation of how the body performs within a disabling environment.

Applying Butler's performance theory to disability reveals the degree to which ability and disability are performed. Able-bodied people perform their daily acts in a particular fashion, to the effect that such performances are the expected norm. When a disabled person does not perform the same acts in a normative fashion, such as communication or mobility, he or she is expected to conform to a different set of performances in order to mimic the norm. These performances can include the use of prosthetics, medications, and isolation from the able-bodied community. For example, a boy with spina bifida is expected to use crutches, braces, or a wheelchair, to desire a cure so that he can be like everyone else, to need charity and pity, to be dependent on others for survival, and to remain nonsexual. Whether or not he wants to perform in this way is immaterial. He is expected to react to his condition in the scripted fashion. His performance as a disabled person is expected by the ablest culture he finds himself in.

Moving Butler's performance theory into the realm of disability theory and literature, disability is as performative in literature as gender. Although like sex, illness does exist in reality, it is also performed. Diane Price Herndl points out that illness

> is a defining term, especially when it involves the categorization of someone as an "invalid"; it is a figure for explaining one's place in

> society. Representing one's self as an invalid puts into play a whole structure of care, attention, responsibility, and privilege. Defining what counts as illness, setting boundaries around who can and cannot be considered an invalid, however "natural" these definitions may seem, are functions of ideology, influenced by representation. (9)

Although Herndl's work focuses on nineteenth-century American texts, her definition of invalid is particularly useful as it clearly points to the importance of representation when examining invalid women in literature. Ill women are categorised as invalids based on how these same women have performed, or represented, their respective illnesses. Because of this, it becomes possible to read all invalidism in literature as a performance of specific behaviours and actions. The specific performance of invalidism in Austen's texts results from an underlying delicacy. This underlying delicacy can be read as a type of disability, as heightened delicacy frequently results in the performance of temporary invalidism. This performance of disability indicates through delicacy to the reader the status and social grouping of a particular invalid character.

Austen's texts contain a variety of performances of disability: hypochondriasis, heightened delicacy, near-fatal fevers, deafness, and paralysis. Herndl's definition of invalidism in the context of nineteenth-century narratives is especially useful here:

> We usually reserve the term "invalid" for someone who is bedridden, but in the nineteenth century it meant a state of weakness or a predisposition to illness. Invalidism therefore referred to a lack of power as well as a tendency toward illness. It is for this reason that I chose to discuss the *invalid* woman rather than just the *ill* one. "Invalid" further carries traces

> of its etymology and suggests the not-valid. Invalidism is therefore the term that best describes the cultural definition of women in the nineteenth century (and perhaps in the twentieth) and the ill woman's relation to power and her culture. But it also describes the historical status accorded to ill women's (and maybe all women's) desires: not valid. (1)

Invalid characters in Austen's texts include *Persuasion*'s Mrs. Smith, who cannot walk, and *Emma*'s Mrs. Bates, who cannot hear. Their conditions segregate them from regular, able-bodied activities, and they remain on the edges of society. Their performances as disabled, with their lack of mobility and independence, fit into what society expected their performances as invalids to be. Invalids, such as *Pride and Prejudice*'s Miss de Bourgh, *Emma*'s Jane Fairfax, *Sense and Sensibility*'s Marianne Dashwood, *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price, and *Persuasion*'s Louisa Musgrove all suffer from illnesses and weaknesses of varying lengths and severities. Only those whose illnesses develop into serious, lengthy, and disabling affairs can be termed invalids. Jane Fairfax is troubled by headaches and general weakness, while Louisa Musgrove likely has a severe concussion because of her fall from the Cobb. These invalids perform as expected, yet unlike Wiltshire's hypothesis on illness and fulfilment, the majority of these women do, in fact, make successful matches. Beyond the invalids are the temporary invalids who suffer suddenly, and generally severely, but soon recover to their full, or near full, strength. Temporary invalids, such as *Sense and Sensibility*'s Marianne Dashwood, take ill during their respective courtships. These temporary invalids and their connections to the courtship narratives will be further explored in the next chapter; however, all these characters perform as expected of invalids (temporary or not) as each performs, with

varying degrees of success, delicacy, and reflection.

The representations of invalids in Austen's novel may be categorized through Herndl's analysis of the female invalid in nineteenth-century literature. Like Wiltshire, Herndl explores the power relationship inherent in invalid relationships; however, rather than finding the invalid characters to be unhappy, vengeful, and seeking a relocation of power, Herndl finds the power relationship between healthy and invalid characters to be significantly more complex:

> The figure of the invalid woman insists on a reading that focuses on the play of power and desire in the narrative, the family, and the culture. The woman who becomes sick is portrayed as a figure with no power, subject to the whims of her body or mind, or as a figure with enormous power, able to achieve her desires through the threat of her imminent death or her disability. Sometimes she is both powerful and powerless. The woman whose illness becomes a focal point for a narrative lives on the boundaries of power; one minute she is in the grips of her own body, which has turned against her and put her at the mercy of doctor, family, and friends, the next minute she is dominating the family and friends in ways that a healthy woman could achieve only in fantasy. Reading the narrative of the invalid demands that one examine the attraction and the repulsion of this figure for readers and for writers and analyze how the narrative power of the invalid translates into cultural power or the lack of it. One must recognize the anger at powerlessness but also the uses of (apparent) powerlessness. (4)

The performances of invalids, fainting and fevers follow the scripted behaviours expected of invalids, yet ultimately the heroines are successful in marriage. Through their invalidism, the heroines are able to perform modesty. The constant presence of the invalid focuses all attention on her, which in turn gives her the power to perform modesty to a captive audience.

The importance of modesty is a thread that runs throughout the conduct books of the late eighteenth century. Modesty, which is intangible but can be performed, became symbolic of all that was considered meek, timid, and virginal about young women. To be truly modest referred directly to a woman's purity. James Fordyce describes female modesty as something that must be protected, even as the concept of modesty itself is to protect the innocence and purity of young women. If the appearance of modesty is destroyed, clearly the appearance of virginity is destroyed as well. Of young girls, Fordyce writes that

> their earliest days are marked by a mixture of sprightliness and simplicity. They run, they laugh, they prattle; and then they often blush, for fear of having offended. As they grow up, their sensibilities become more enlightened, and more awake. They blush oftener. It is the precious colouring of virtue, as one has happily phrased it. They contract a quicker perception of what is decent, and of what is wise. A sweet timidity was given them to guard their innocence, by inclining them to shrink from whatever might threaten to injure it. Their passions, as they rise, are restrained from exorbitance, by a secret sentiment of shame and honour. (69-70)

The performance of blushing, timidity, and reserve are vital to the appearance of delicacy and, in turn, modesty. Fordyce continues by showing the degeneration of modesty and the result:

> By little and little their natural fearfulness begins to abate. For a while they are shocked at signs of rudeness. Their ears are wounded by the language of vice: Oaths, imprecations, double meanings, every thing obscene fills them with disgust and horror. But custom soon begets familiarity; and familiarity produces indifference. The emotions of delicacy are less frequent, less strong. And now they seldom blush, although perhaps they often affect it. At the image of sin they tremble no longer: their minds are already debauched. (70)

Once the performance of modesty falters, the inference is that the woman in question is no longer a virgin. Space is made for married women to retain their modesty while they are no longer virgins simply because sexual relations within marriage are not illicit, but expected. She has come into knowledge exactly when she was supposed to, and therefore her modesty is intact so long as she maintains her natural delicacy. Yeazell comments that

> a modest woman may not remain a virgin forever, but her very modesty can be imagined as a kind of boundary making, a virtue especially critical to preserve at moments when other boundaries seem vulnerable; while so long as she is represented as both pure and purely feminine, her figure can thus doubly serve as a talisman against danger. (23)

Fordyce and other conduct book writers were far more concerned with unmarried women

engaged in courtship rituals. A woman's virginity could not be in question in order for a successful marriage to occur. For this reason, a young woman's virginity and modesty needed to appear intact.

Along with modesty, delicacy plays an important role as a further descriptor of feminine beauty and charm. While a woman was expected to be reserved in company, to blush when her modesty commanded it, and to be submissive to the opinions of men (More, *Essays* 145-46), she was also expected to perform delicacy. Edmund Burke writes of delicacy as an essentially feminine trait:

> The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness, or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it. I would not here be understood to say, that weakness betraying very bad health has any share in beauty; but the ill effect of this is not because it is weakness, but because the ill state of health which produces such weakness alters the other conditions of beauty; the parts in such a case collapse; the bright colour, the *lamen purpureum juventae* is gone, and the fine variations is lost in wrinkles, sudden breaks, and right lines. (179-80)

Fordyce further expands on the weakness of women to state that "the fine feeling of nature and of sentiment. . . may be supposed to result from the delicacy of their organs" (*Sermons* 225-26). Delicacy, that innate weakness of women, could be performed so long as it did not affect a woman's bloom. In fact, a woman could perform as weak and delicate as possible and still be regarded as a potential love interest, so long as she kept her bloom. Through such performances of delicacy she could perform as an invalid,

thereby proving her delicacy while retaining her bloom. The manipulation of invalidism as a performance of weakness is therefore vital to the concept of feminine delicacy and modesty.

As the performance of modesty involves the performance of delicacy and, in turn, invalidism, a balance must be struck among these performances in order for the appearance of virginity and modesty to remain intact. An overly sentimental woman runs the risk of being seen as too delicate or insincere. An overly modest woman can be interpreted as a prude. Yet a degree of delicacy is needed to display visually the innately delicate and sentimental feminine nature. A delicate, modest woman would not walk the three miles to Netherfield "at a quick pace" and alone, as neither her constitution nor reputation could manage it (*Pride and Prejudice* 70). A reserved, modest woman with delicacy like Fanny Price would be unable to endure long walks or strenuous activities, such as picking roses in the mid-day sun. This is a sign not only of Fanny's innate feminine weakness, but also of her feminine modesty. What happens, however, when invalidism becomes the principle performance? Fanny's weakened states also allow for the performance of delicacy. While both Marianne Dashwood and Fanny Price rest on their respective sofas, the notion of upper-class delicacy performs through their bodies. Subsequently, the performance of delicacy makes weak nerves a signifier of modesty. The performance of disability is crucial to the successful performance of modesty.

The argument as to whether or not modesty and delicacy were innate or learned feminine traits preoccupied conduct book writers; however, this controversy does not change the fact that both modesty and delicacy had to be performed in order to be displayed. According to Yeazell, "the modest woman can be recognized by her downcast

eyes, her head turned aside, and above all by the blush that suffuses her cheek – an 'innocent paint' more attractive than any rouge, and mysterious proof that she has neither done nor thought anything for which she genuinely need blush" (5). As modesty became further sexualized because of its connection with virtue and virginity, the act of blushing also became infused with sexual meaning. In 1712, Steele rejected the tradition that blushing works as an indicator of virginal purity. In *The Spectator*, Steele writes that women "guard their Reputation rather than their Modesty; as if Guilt lay in being under the Imputation of a Fault, and not in Commision of it. *Orbicilla* is the kindest poor thing in the Town, but the most blushing Creature living: It is true she has not lost the Sense of Shame, but she has lost the Sense of Innocence" (413). However, later in the same article, Steele notes that real modesty does exist but it is essentially undescribable: "there is a Decency in the Aspect and Manner of Ladies contracted from an Habit of Virtue, and from general Reflections that regard a modest Conduct, all which may be understood though they cannot be described" (415). Although Steele argues against the performance of blushing as an indication of virgin modesty, he does admit that there is something in the performance of the "modest Conduct" of virtuous ladies that indicates modesty. By mid-century, most conduct book writers "seem to have found the young woman's blush irresistible" (Yeazell 68). John Gregory warns his daughters that "when a girl ceases to blush, she has lost the most powerful charm of beauty" (58) over the opposite sex, because the blush "is the usual companion of innocence" (59). The performance of the blush became part of the larger performance of modesty. Because the blush is part of the larger performance of modesty, it is critical that the blush is clearly visible. A pale cheek is needed for the blush to be most apparent, and the pale cheek itself suggests delicacy.

In her letters, Austen frequently catalogues the various ailments and illnesses currently affecting the family and those in the neighbourhood. This is not to say that Austen was conscious of the performative aspects of modesty and delicacy, but her letters do reveal the level to which the performances of invalidism were theatrical. Letters are punctuated with incidental colds (30 June 1808), coughs (20 Feb 1807), and fevers (14 Sept 1804). Austen comments on the loss of beauty as a result of illness (30 June 1808), but also on the ability for useful employment while only mildly indisposed (20 Feb 1807). Her comment on the fever in Lyme is most interesting: "It was absolutely necessary that I should have the little fever & indisposition, which I had; - it has been all the fashion this week in Lyme" (14 Sept 1804). This suggests that there is a theatrical aspect to being slightly indisposed, an affectedness of which Austen's heroines are also conscious.

In Austen's texts, there are subtle differences in the performances of those who are legitimately ill and those who affect a higher degree of delicacy in order to appear modest and upper class. Austen's replication of "the tensions, paradoxes, and contradictions that we see in the conduct material" (Poovey xiii) not only presents her feminine heroine as a rational creature, as Poovey suggests, but also explores the necessity of disability found in the performance of modesty. Performances of modesty and delicacy by the various heroines are found throughout Austen's texts. Some performances, such as those by *Mansfield Park*'s Fanny Price and *Persuasion*'s Anne Elliot, are based in natural bodily weakness, while others, such as those by Lady Bertram and Mary Musgrove, are based in indolence. Different again is the performance by Marianne Dashwood, which begins as consciously performed but results in a serious

illness. These performances of both modesty and delicacy reveal that the performances themselves are consciously constructed.

Fanny Price's performance of modesty is consciously constructed rather than being an innate virtue. The rich inner monologue in the novel allows the reader to be privy to Fanny's thought process. This view, however, challenges the traditional argument of the conduct book that modesty is an innate trait. Although the act of blushing is not questioned, Fanny's modest conduct is. Fanny blushes, seemingly uncontrollably, when any attention is given to her. Upon Sir Thomas's return from Antigua, he asks after his niece and

> perceiving her, came forward with a kindness which astonished and penetrated her, calling her his dear Fanny, kissing her affectionately, and observing with decided pleasure how much she was grown! Fanny knew not how to feel, nor where to look. She was quite oppressed. (Austen, *Mansfield Park* 195)

The fact that Fanny lacked the knowledge as to how she should act in light of such affection and attention speaks to the degree to which her behaviour is a performance. Fanny is clearly unsure of the proper and appropriate reaction to her uncle, and, as a result, "a fine blush" appears on her face in lieu of her actual voice (195). Although the text suggests that Fanny has no control over the blush because she barely has the "courage to lift her eyes to his face" (196), the blush is part of her internalised performance of modesty.

The question as to whether or not Fanny is conscious of the proper performance of modesty can be answered quickly through Fanny's own reaction to the theatre at

Mansfield Park. As the young adults decide to perform *Lovers' Vows*, Julia and Maria fight for Crawford's affections and for the role of Agatha (155). Fanny considers the female characters to be immoral and is troubled by the lack of modesty in the play:

> Agatha and Amelia appeared to her in their different ways so totally improper for home representation – the situation of one, and the language of the other, so unfit to be expressed by any woman of modesty, that she could hardly suppose her cousins could be aware of what they were engaging in. (158)

Fanny is keenly aware of the behaviour expected and that acting as a dishonoured woman or as a lovesick daughter would call the modesty of the actresses into question. This is compounded when both Julia and Maria want to play opposite Crawford, regardless of the fact that Maria is engaged to Rushworth. The performances by these would-be actresses conflict, for Fanny, with the proper performance of modesty, which dictates that such questionable enjoyments could only harm a woman's reputation. Fanny understands that her concerns surrounding the modesty of performing *Lovers' Vows* are part of the larger performance of modesty within her society. She is conscious of the need to perform as a modest woman in order to maintain her reputation.

Fanny is later courted by Henry Crawford, whose previously immodest behaviour has left Fanny not only uninterested in a relationship but also eager to escape his very presence. Upon the discovery that Crawford is responsible for William's promotion in the Navy, Fanny actively performs modesty when she finds herself alone with Crawford at Mansfield Park. Although she is clearly still uninterested in Crawford's advances, her own active cultivation of modest behaviour speaks to the degree to which such

performances were expected from her society:

> She might have disdained him in all the dignity of angry virtue, in the grounds of Sotherton, or the theatre at Mansfield Park; but he approached her now with rights that demanded different treatment. She must be courteous, and she must be compassionate. She must have a sensation of being honoured, and whether thinking of herself or her brother, she must have a strong feeling of gratitude. (333)

Fanny clearly understands that she is expected to show Crawford gratitude because of what he has done for her brother, and therefore performs with the appropriate modesty. The most intriguing phrase is that "she must have a *sensation* of being honoured" (333). This speaks not only to the performance of modesty, but also to the active fabrication of emotions associated with modesty. Fanny's conscious performance of modesty clearly indicates the level to which modesty is cultivated rather than innate.

The other aspect of modesty that Fanny performs is delicacy. Although Fanny's general weakness and delicacy are never medically diagnosed, her bodily performance of delicacy is necessary in order to prove her modesty. Fanny's performance of delicacy is, in fact, a performance of disability that highlights her performance of modesty. Her general weakness is cured by riding a horse, but upon the death of her "old grey poney," Fanny "was in danger of feeling the loss in her health" (64). Her subsequent ill treatment at the hands of Aunt Norris, "who was walking all day, thinking every body ought to walk as much" (64), results in "ill-effects" (65) and Edmund's belief that Fanny's health is delicate enough to warrant his attentions. The performance of delicacy is followed by Fanny's headache as the result of further ill use by her two aunts. Forced to walk twice

to her Aunt Norris's house after cutting roses in the hot sun, Fanny rests on the sofa after dinner. Her delicacy is characterised as laziness by Mrs. Norris, who declares that Fanny is "idling away all the evening upon a sofa" and that Fanny "should learn to think of other people; and take my word for it, it is a shocking trick for a young person to be always lolling upon a sofa" (97). However, Fanny's headache is a direct result of spending too much time in the direct sun, as well as overexertion. Her delicacy frames such activities as cutting roses as overexertion, while at the same time pointing to the upper-class delicacy, which marks her as a well-bred, modest woman.

Fanny's delicacy, which is present throughout the text, is performed through weakness and headaches. These rather commonplace ailments would not, as was feared by Burke, detract from her bloom, but instead increase the vibrancy of her blushes. Upon Sir Thomas's return, Fanny is described as being improved in health, although for the reader Fanny's weakness and delicacy appear as principle features of her constitution. The narrator tells us that because "a fine blush. . . succeeded the previous paleness of her face, [Sir Thomas] was justified in his belief of her equal improvement in health and beauty" (195). The blush serves as a performance of her modesty and health, and her pale face serves as a performance of her delicacy.

Unlike Fanny, Lady Bertram's performance of modesty is completely tied up in her performance of delicacy. There is no performance of blushing or of reserve. Instead, Lady Bertram relies on her performance of delicacy to convey her status as a modest, high-class woman. The narrator comments that around the same time that Fanny moved to Mansfield Park, "Lady Bertram, in consequence of a little ill-health, and great deal of indolence, gave up the house in town, which she had been used to occupy every spring,

and remained wholly in the country" (50-1). By affecting the performance of disability in order to appear as an invalid, Lady Bertram is able to display her delicacy. The degree to which her delicacy has been affected is made clear in her behaviour towards Fanny later on. After forcing Fanny out into the hot sun to pluck roses, Lady Bertram herself remains in the shade because of her delicacy. Although she later admits her guilt in Fanny's overexertion, Lady Bertram reinforces her own status as delicate and sickly: "I am very much afraid [Fanny] caught the headach there, for the heat was enough to kill any body. It was as much as I could bear myself. Sitting and calling to Pug, and trying to keep him from the flower-beds, was almost too much for me" (100). Lady Bertram's performance of delicacy is, in fact, a performance of indolence. Her affectation of delicacy indicates the performative aspect inherent in both modesty and delicacy.

The performative aspect of delicacy is further illuminated when the performances of Lady Bertram and Fanny are compared. Both Lady Bertram and Fanny rest on the sofa, but as Julia points out, "Fanny is as little upon the sofa as any body in the house" (98). While there is constant effort on the part of Mrs. Norris to force more exercise on Fanny, Lady Bertram held "exercise to be as unnecessary for every body as it was unpleasant to herself" (64) and therefore Lady Bertram remains sedentary in the house. Lady Bertram's performance of delicacy is rooted solely in her performance of indolence, while Fanny's performance is rooted in her general weakness. As a result, the narrator treats the affected Lady Bertram with sarcasm, which is seen in the comment on Lady Bertram's dislike of exercise (64), and treats Fanny with sympathy, visible in Edmund's exposure of Fanny's ill-use by her aunts as the cause of her headaches and weakness (98). Although both women perform delicacy, only Fanny's delicacy is taken seriously by the

narrator. Lady Bertram declares herself exhausted from calling her dog while sitting in the shade (100), and this declaration points clearly to her affected delicacy. Conversely, Fanny's headache, which is the result of "standing and stooping in a hot sun" while cutting roses, as well as walking twice to Mrs. Norris' house (98), is the unaffected performance of delicacy. Fanny is not considered immodest because of her delicacy; rather, her delicacy and performance of invalidism are central to her performance of modesty, which consists of blushes and downcast eyes. Lady Bertram, by comparison, is portrayed as an indolent woman who affects delicacy in lieu of the real thing in order to bolster her claims to modesty. The result is clear: Fanny is treated with understanding while Lady Bertram is treated with contempt.

Like Fanny, Anne Elliot's performance of modesty is found in her blushes. However, unlike Fanny, whose blushes stem from unwelcome attention, Anne's blushes come as a reaction to the presence of her former suitor, Wentworth, and her sometime suitor, Mr. Elliot. Upon the mere mention of Wentworth, Anne seeks "the comfort of cool air for her flushed cheeks" (Austen, *Persuasion* 64). As a result of Mrs. Smith's mention of Mr. Elliot, "a blush overspread Anne's cheeks. She could say nothing" (209). In this case, the blush allows Anne to communicate her knowledge and embarrassment in the face of potential suitors. Although the blush should communicate innocence, in Anne's case the blush indicates her unresolved feelings for Wentworth (64). The blush may display her modesty to her society, but the reader is well aware that Anne's blushing is a result of her previous attachment to Wentworth.

Anne's performance of delicacy is found in her performance of depression and weak nerves. This performance of delicacy and disability makes up the majority of

Anne's status as a modest woman. Following the end of Wentworth and Anne's relationship, Anne is afflicted with "an early loss of bloom and spirits" (67). The loss of bloom essentially excludes Anne from the marriage market, and her low spirits leaves her in the position of caretaker of her sister, Mary Musgrove. Once Wentworth returns, Anne's nerves take precedence. When discussion at the Crofts' turns to the subject of Wentworth, it "was a new sort of trial to Anne's nerves" (87). Again, after seeing Wentworth for the first time in seven years, she describes her relief as nervous gratitude. At one point, Anne claims to have a headache in order to avoid seeing Wentworth: "[Anne] had staid at home, under the mixed plea of a head-ache of her own, and some return of indisposition in little Charles. She had thought only of avoiding Captain Wentworth" (109). Anne uses her position as a delicate, modest female to perform as an invalid in order to avoid seeing her former suitor. In other words, Anne actively cultivates her performance of delicacy. Anne's lack of high spirits and delicate nerves allow her to perform as a delicate and modest woman.

Anne's performance as a modest woman is best understood when compared to the behaviour of the sister, Mary Musgrove. Mary's performance of modesty is, like Lady Bertram's performance, based on her performance of delicacy. Mary, like Anne, performs delicacy, which in turn displays her as a modest, well-bred woman. The narrator describes Mary as a woman who affects delicacy in contrast to Anne, who legitimately suffers from depression and poor nerves. As Anne visits her sister, the narrator states

> that it was rather a surprise to her to find Mary alone; but being alone, her being unwell and out of spirits, was almost a matter of course. Though

> better endowed than the elder sister, Mary had not Anne's understanding or temper. While well, and happy, and properly attended to, she had great good humour and excellent spirits; but any indisposition sunk her completely; she had no resources for solitude; and inheriting a considerable share of the Elliot self-importance, was very prone to add to every other distress that of fancying herself neglected and ill-used. (75)

The rest of the scene has Mary reiterating how ill she feels, but in her miraculous recovery, Mary's conscious performance of delicacy becomes clear:

> A little farther perseverance in patience, and forced cheerfulness on Anne's side, produced nearly a cure on Mary's. She could soon sit upright on the sofa, and began to hope she might be able to leave it by dinnertime. Then, forgetting to think about it, she was at the other end of the room, beautifying a nosegay; then, she ate her cold meat; and then she was well enough to propose a little walk. (77)

The narrator highlights the fact that Mary consciously performs as an invalid because when she is distracted by the nosegay, she forgets entirely about her temporary disability. This conscious performance of delicacy, which consists of lying on the sofa and demanding attention, echoes the performance of Lady Bertram's indolence in *Mansfield Park*.

Mary's performance as an invalid becomes all the more ridiculous in contrast with Mrs. Smith. Suffering from "a severe rheumatic fever, which finally settling in her legs, had made her for the present a cripple" (173), Mrs. Smith is described as a "poor, infirm, helpless widow" (174). She maintains her modesty as she is not eager to slander the

character of Mr. Elliot who had taken an interest in Anne (203). Unlike Mary, who cannot bear to be unattended, Mrs. Smith does not immodestly desire attention. Rather, Mrs. Smith performs as unaffected invalids were expected to, by remaining on the fringe of society, dependent on Mrs. Rooke for work, care, and gossip:

> As soon as I could use my hands, she taught me to knit, which has been a great amusement; and she put me in the way of making these little thread-cases, pin-cushions and card-racks, which you always find me so busy about. . . . Every body's heart is open, you know, when they have recently escaped from severe pain, or are recovering the blessing of health, and nurse Rooke thoroughly understands when to speak. She is a shrewd, intelligent, sensible woman. Hers is a line for seeing human nature; and she has a fund of good sense and observation which, as a companion, make her infinitely superior to thousands of those who having received 'the best education in the world,' know nothing worth attending to. (175-6)

Mrs. Smith performs as the ideal invalid. She maintains her "generosity and fortitude," rather than succumbing to "selfishness and impatience" (176). Her behaviour is the complete opposite of Mary's behaviour, and the result for the reader is the further ridiculing of Mary's fanciful performance.

Marianne Dashwood's performance of modesty is conspicuous in its absence. Her lack of propriety is visible through her speech and behaviour. Rather than performing in accordance with Elinor's advice, Marianne acts against the recommendations of eighteenth-century conduct book literature. After meeting with

Willoughby after she sprains her ankle, Marianne's overly enthusiastic conversation is questioned by Elinor. Marianne is offended by Elinor's ideals of propriety:

> I have been too much at my ease, too happy, too frank. I have erred against every common-place notion of decorum; I have been open and sincere where I ought to have been reserved, spiritless, dull, and deceitful: - had I talked only of the weather and the roads, and had I spoken only once in ten minutes, this reproach would have been spared. (*Sense and Sensibility* 83)

Rather than perform as a reserved woman, Marianne initially performs as an immodest woman. The result of such behaviour is that Marianne's modesty is called into question. At the ball at Norland, Marianne and Willoughby "were partners for half the time; and when obliged to separate for a couple of dances, were careful to stand together and scarcely spoke a word to any body else. Such conduct made them of course most exceedingly laughed at; but ridicule could not shame, and seemed hardly to provoke them" (88-9). Marianne actively performs immodestly, believing that "if there had been any real impropriety in what I did, I should be sensible of it at the time" (102). Rather than cultivate proper and modest performances, Marianne consciously acts against the culture of propriety in favour of embracing sensibility. She actively performs in an immodest manner, but later redeems herself with her increased sense and reflection following her severe fever at Cleveland.

Marianne's active cultivation of performances extends into her delicacy and invalidism. Rather than attempt to quell her depression following Willoughby's departure, Marianne actively performs delicacy: "Marianne would have thought herself

very inexcusable had she been able to sleep at all the first night after parting from Willoughby. She would have been ashamed to look her family in the face the next morning, had she not risen from her bed in more need of repose than when she lay down in it" (115). Marianne's performance of melancholy is repeatedly cultivated, regardless of the implications for her status as a modest woman. Increasingly, Marianne's performance of melancholy becomes an excuse for her rude behaviour. When Colonel Brandon appears instead of Willoughby, Marianne rushes out of the room, leaving Elinor to excuse Marianne's behaviour as the result of "head-aches, low spirits, and over fatigues" (187). Later, Marianne's performance of melancholy becomes a performance of nervous delicacy and temporary disability. After nearly fainting upon finally seeing Willoughby (200), Marianne actively pursues an even more sickly status. Elinor, upon returning to Marianne's bedside, describes Marianne as suffering from nervous faintness:

> [Elinor] returned to Marianne, whom she found attempting to rise from the bed, and whom she reached just in time to prevent her from falling on the floor; for it was many days since she had any appetite, and many nights since she had really slept; and now, when her mind was no longer supported by the fever of suspense, the consequence of all this was felt in an aching head, a weakened stomach, and a general nervous faintness. (206)

Marianne's determination not to eat or sleep is all part of her performance of heightened delicacy; however, her conscious performance of delicacy results in an actual debilitating illness. Purposefully walking through an area at Cleveland where "the grass was longest and wettest, had – assisted by the still greater imprudence of sitting in her wet shoes and

stockings – given Marianne a cold so violent" (315) that she ends up with a serious fever. At this point, Marianne has stopped consciously performing delicacy, but because of her fever, she continues to perform as an invalid until she recovers from her illness.

After Marianne's illness subsides, she begins a long convalescence. Here her performance of modesty is actively pursued. Rather than the robust, energetic, and immodest Marianne, this new Marianne is reserved and modest. Her bodily performance is described as being found in "the hollow eye, the sickly skin, the posture of reclining weakness, and the warm acknowledgment of peculiar obligation" (345). Her conscious performance of modesty pleases Elinor, who "honoured [Marianne] for a plan which originated so nobly as this; though smiling to see the same eager fancy which had been leading her to the extreme of languid indolence and selfish repining, now at work in introducing excess into a scheme of such rational employment and virtuous self-controul" (348). The reformed Marianne actively cultivates her performance as a modest woman, and in doing so, exposes the performative aspects of both modesty and delicacy.

The performance of disability is central to the literary performance of Austen's modest heroines. As modesty is a virtue and cannot be visually displayed, delicacy, which is the marker of modesty, must be performed instead. By performing delicacy, the heroine expresses her modesty, thereby reaffirming her place within the culture of propriety. Fanny's conscious performance of delicacy exposes the paradox of propriety, as it is impossible for Fanny to display unaffected modesty without being aware of the affectation of modesty. Her juxtaposition with Lady Bertram serves to further highlight the varying degrees of affectation necessary to perform delicacy. Anne is aware of her feelings towards her former suitor Wentworth and her new suitor Elliot, as her delicacy

causes her to blush when either gives her attention. At the same time, her blushes signal her modesty to those around her; therefore, the paradox of propriety is present in Anne's behaviour as well. Mary's affected illness serves to explore the performative aspects of delicacy when she is compared to Mrs. Smith. Marianne's conscious cultivation of delicacy causes her not only to perform as an invalid, but actually to make herself ill, thereby illustrating the more dangerous aspect of affecting delicacy. Yet Marianne is able to reinvent herself as a modest woman in spite of her earlier reckless behaviour because her illness has theoretically forced her into more reflective state. Marianne's time as a convalescent highlights the performative aspects of modesty as she consciously constructs a modest performance in line with that of her sister, Elinor. The various performances by these heroines clearly show the relationship between the production of delicacy, and therefore disability, and the culture of propriety. It is now necessary to examine the role of sensibility during courtship between the temporary invalid and her suitor in order to understand the relationship between delicacy and disability that evolves in Austen's texts.

Chapter Three: Courtships

Perhaps the most interesting feature of Austen's courtship narratives is the apparent necessity of temporary invalidism in order to win successfully a marriage proposal. Although the majority of Austen's heroines follow the essence of modest conduct, which should be enough to gain a potential suitor's interest, the performance of temporary invalidism ultimately solidifies the relationship. The temporary invalidism performed by Austen's heroines, however, is based not on the performance of modesty, but rather on the performance of sensibility. Considering Austen's own criticism of sentimental novels and the culture of sensibility, her heroines' use of heightened sensibility during courtship serves to illustrate the link of the performance of delicacy to disability and sensibility in the courtship narratives.

Depictions of health and invalidism appear in many of Austen's novels, in both the background and the foreground. John Wiltshire points out that

> in the novels these characters inhabit, the issue of health is, if not paramount, brought actively into play with the educational and courtship narratives that can concurrently be read from, or into, the texts. And indeed if the preceding century's epistemology focused upon the responses of consciousness to the external world, the most significant eighteenth-century medical experiments examined the responses of the body – the bones, the tissues, the nerves – to the external world, and by a variety of agencies, of which the terms "nerves" and "sensibility" are but two, that medical understanding entered into a general culture. (*Jane Austen* 9)

Austen was clearly conscious of the culture of sensibility and the importance of delicacy. In her texts, there are a variety of representations of health and invalidism, from those who are temporarily ill, such as Elizabeth and Jane Bennet, to those who are permanently ill, such as Miss Anne de Bourgh. What is most intriguing is the necessity of temporary invalidism in the courtship narratives of the older Bennet sisters. Although Wiltshire agrees with George Cheyne, suggesting that "health is intimately related to enablement and fulfilment, illness to frustration, anger and defeat" (22), in *Pride and Prejudice* temporary invalidism is essential to the formation of both Jane's and Elizabeth's marriages. In this way, Austen challenges the pervasive conduct book literature of her era, which saw physical health as a reflection of mental purity. But at the same time, Austen is critical of the dominant culture of sensibility, which had women affecting a "posture of reclining weakness" (*Sense and Sensibility* 345) in order to attract suitors.

The belief that sensibility was an innate trait developed throughout the eighteenth-century, and moved fluidly between the literary and scientific discourses. Sensibility was explained scientifically through the emerging medical discourse, which grounded the discussion within the study of the nervous system. In his study of the nervous system, Newton proposed that "Vibrations, being propagated along solid Fibres of the optick Nerves into the Brain, cause the Sense of seeing" (319). In this model, nerves become essential for both sensory perception and bodily reaction. Newton further posits that "Animal Motion perform'd by Vibrations of the Medium, excited in the Brain by the power of the Will" was responsible for muscle movement (328). Nerves are, therefore, both active and passive, as they can be acted upon, as well as called upon to act. Newton's concept of sensibility's ability to act without immediate external stimuli is

important to the performance of sensibility in literature.

Although both men and women were subject to sensibility, women were believed to be more susceptible to heightened sensibility because of their innately weaker nerves. Originally, susceptibility to sensory input was referred to as sensibility; however, by the mid-eighteenth century, sensibility also "came to denote the faculty of feeling, the capacity for extremely refined emotion and a quickness to display compassion for suffering" (Todd 7). As women were believed to be unable to control their bodies, unlike men, it stood to reason that their nerves and sensibility would be seen as weaker as well. Women with true sensibility would succumb easily to weak nerves, which resulted in a heightened sensibility. As Todd points out, "women were thought to express emotions with their bodies more sincerely and spontaneously than men; hence their propensity to crying, blushing and fainting" (19). Because of the superior mental power of the male, men were believed to process sensory stimuli without significant strain to their nerves. Women, however, were thought to lack similar mental powers for processing stimuli, which results in her nerves being more affected by sensibility. The woman's weakened mental state required a bodily performance to communicate sensibility. The belief that sensibility was an innate feminine characteristic was outlined by More:

> Sweet Sensibility! thou keen delight!
> Thou hasty moral! sudden sense of right!
> Thou untaught goodness! Virtue's precious seed!
> Thou sweet precursor of the gen'rous deed!
> Beauty's quick relish! Reason's radiant morn,
> Which dawns soft light before Reflexion's born! (*Sensibility* 282)

According to More, sensibility aided in moral decisions and the display of beauty. Like modesty, sensibility was argued by moralists to be an innate trait that should be preserved in order to maintain the appearance of true virtue. Although sensibility is linked to sexual purity, the literary performance of sensibility became aligned with the fainting and ravished heroines of sentimental novels.

By the end of the eighteenth century sensibility was already under attack by moral theorists for a variety of reasons. More, whose long poem "Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle" had previously extolled the virtues of sensibility, "came to see [sensibility] as a flight from responsibility" and was concerned about the impact sensibility was having on "the Christian notion of female chastity" (Todd 137). While sensibility had originally "mythologized and hugely elevated a flamboyant virginity in the young girl" (Todd 137), there was an increasingly troublesome link in sentimental fiction between sensibility and female sexuality. Todd points out that "fictional heroines who indulged sexually usually died indeed; none the less they remained heroines and their surrender to irrational and uncontrolled passion often appeared fascinating and noble" (137). Sensibility no longer protected feminine virtue but instead endangered it.

Austen's criticisms of the culture of sensibility first appear in her juvenilia. In "Frederic and Elfrida," Elfrida is desperate to recapture Frederic's attentions and force him into marriage. Upon learning that he has no desire to marry her, Elfrida faints repeatedly in order to regain his attention ("Frederic and Elfrida" 46). The insincerity of Elfrida's sensibility is clearly under attack as she uses her performance of heightened sensibility to manipulate her former lover into marriage. As Todd points out, Austen "parodies the ecstatic tone of sensibility" throughout her texts and "mocks characters who

are overwhelmed by their sensitive and palpitating bodies" (145). Austen's reaction to the performative aspect of sensibility is clearly seen in her treatment of Elfrida, as well as in the narrative chastising of Marianne in *Sense and Sensibility*.

It is not the concept of sensibility itself that is attacked by More and Austen, but rather the affected performance of sensibility in women. Sensibility, like modesty, is communicated through bodily performance. The internal bodily process of the nervous system's communication with the brain needs an external bodily performance if the individual's degree of sensibility is to be visible to society. In sentimental novels, heroines display their virtue from within the language of bodily sensibility, so much so that the "most authentic emotions are signalled not by words but by tears, blushes, palpitations and fainting fits" (Todd 120). The female body communicates, not the woman herself. Mullan posits that the rationale for such bodily performances of sensibility creates a more authentic bodily performance in literature:

> In novels, the articulacy of sentiment is produced via a special kind of inward attention: a concern with feeling as articulated by the body – by its postures and gestures, its involuntary palpitations and collapses. Here sensibility is both private and public, and here, transcending the influences of speech, the novelist finds an eloquence which promises the true communication of feelings. (16)

The body was not only required for the literary experience of sensibility, but is vital for the expression and performance of sensibility. More's "Sensibility: A Poetical Epistle" reveals the extent to which nerves and increased receptivity were coveted as a positive feminine and artistic trait:

Yet, what is wit, and what the Poet's art?

Can Genius shield the vulnerable heart?

Ah, no! where bright imagination reigns,

The fine-wrought spirit feels acuter pains:

Where glow exalted sense, and taste refin'd,

There keener anguish rankles in the mind:

There feeling is diffus'd thro' ev'ry part,

Thrills in each nerve, and lives in all the heart:

And those whose gen'rous souls each tear wou'd keep

From others' eyes, are born themselves to weep. (273)

The increased nervous sensibility of the "fine-wrought spirit" is associated with "exalted sense" and "taste refin'd" but can only be expressed through the bodily performance of tears and anguished countenance. Although these performances were rooted in nervous sensibility, there was increasing concern of counterfeit performances of sensibility. More admits that deciphering true sensibility is difficult, as it needs external performance:

As words are but th' external marks, to tell

The fair ideas in the mind that dwell;

And only are of things the outward sign,

And not the things themselves, they but define;

So exclamations, tender tones, fond tears,

And all the graceful drapery Pity wears;

These are not Pity's self, they but express

Her inward sufferings by their pictur'd dress;

And these fair marks, reluctant I relate,

These lovely symbols may be counterfeit. (283-84)

While these performances mimic the bodily experience of sensibility, More argues that because the true virtue of sensibility may not be present, the performance may be false. The danger becomes, according to More, that affected sensibility provides women with an excuse to shirk responsibility.

There are, who fill with brilliant plaints the page,

If a poor linnet meet the gunner's rage:

There are, who for a dying fawn display

The tend'rest anguish in the sweetest lay;

Who for a wounded animal deplore,

As if friend, parent, country were no more;

Who boast quick rapture trembling in their eye,

If from the spider's snare they save a fly;

Whose well-sung sorrows every breast inflame,

And break all hearts but his from whom they came:

Yet, scorning life's *dull* duties to attend,

Will persecute a wife, or wrong a friend. (284)

While most of the bodily markings of sensibility are present, such as performing "tend'rest anguish" and "quick rapture trembling," the required human empathy is missing, thereby making the performance counterfeit. Ideally, feeling and morality should be linked for performance to be authentic. When feeling and morality are divorced, the performance of sensibility is counterfeit and affected.

The performance of delicacy is essential to the performance of sensibility, just as it is with modesty. As Barker-Benfield explains, "while it could be synonymous with 'sensibility' (both words denoting nerve quality), 'delicacy' represented a wished-for, built-in inhibitor of the sexual dangers inhering in sensibility itself, the automatic responsiveness of material physiological process" (299). In real life, feminine delicacy would prevent a woman from spontaneously acting on her overpowering emotions; however, the literary performance of sensibility sexualizes this heightened delicacy by causing the heroines to faint, run mad, or, as in the case of Marianne, disregard modesty and propriety altogether. But while illness because of heightened sensibility "became the last retreat of the morally pure" (Mullan 16), the "posture of reclining weakness" (*Sense and Sensibility* 345) served to distinguish the sufferer from other women, as well as to make the invalid more sexually appealing because of her refined sensibilities and bodily weakness.

Delicacy appears consistently as part of Austen's courtship narratives. For the performance of delicacy to be authentic, there must be a performance of disability. Although the illnesses vary, the delicacy of the heroines is consistent. The performance of sensibility by these heroines serves to highlight their heightened delicacy. In performing as a weaker creature, the heroine displays her weaker nerves. While Wiltshire maintains that ill-health is directly related to "frustration, anger and defeat" ("Jane Austen" 134), a degree of delicacy is necessary for successful courtship. The performance of delicacy indicates the heroines' affiliation with upper-class sensibility, which was valued in conduct books, such as those by More, as a marker of pure modesty. At the same time, because the disability is temporary and serves to highlight the heroine's

delicacy, and therefore her sensibility, marriage can ultimately occur. However, if the heroine is unable to recover, like Miss de Bourgh of *Pride and Prejudice*, her disability serves not only to mark her as an eligible, upper-class, well-bred woman, but also leaves her outside of the courtship narratives in Austen's texts.

In *Pride and Prejudice* Jane Bennet falls ill as the result of riding to Netherfield in the rain and later suffers from depression as a result of Bingley's abandonment. Her performance of delicacy, and therefore disability, provides further opportunity for courtship. Rather than confining Jane to a life of seculsion, as in the case of Mrs. Smith in *Persuasion*, invalidism heightens Jane's ability to be courted. Although she is kept partially secluded during her illness at Netherfield, Jane's performance of delicacy proves her status as a well-bred woman. Jane's performance of disability allows her to perform within the culture of sensibility, while at the same time maintain the ideals found in conduct book literature.

Jane's illness is immediately used by Mrs. Bennet as a way to further Jane's relationship with Bingley through Jane's performance of sensibility. Mrs. Bennet is quite thrilled by the fact that Jane must remain at Netherfield until she fully recovers. The narrator states that "till the next morning, however, [Mrs. Bennet] was not aware of all the felicity of her contrivance" (69) when she learns that Jane must stay at Netherfield because she has become ill. Mrs. Bennet is not the least bit concerned, even though Mr. Bennet warns her of her guilt: "'If your daughter should have a dangerous fit of illness, if she should die, it would be a comfort to know that it was all in pursuit of Mr. Bingley, and under your orders'" (69). Jane's illness provides Mrs. Bennet with the opportunity to keep Jane in the same house as Bingley, and thereby promote their relationship: "Had

she found Jane in any apparent danger, Mrs. Bennet would have been very miserable; but being satisfied on seeing her that her illness was not alarming, she had no wish of her recovering immediately, as her restoration to health would probably remove her from Netherfield" (78). By playing up Jane's delicacy by claiming "she is a great deal too ill to be moved" (78), Mrs. Bennet achieves two goals: she is able to keep Jane at Netherfield, and she is able to have Bingley witness Jane's delicacy.

What is most notable in Jane's temporary invalidism at Netherfield is the power she has as an invalid. Although she remains partially secluded in a room in Netherfield, Jane's illness is a constant presence in the drawing room. During her first evening meal at Netherfield, Elizabeth observes that Bingley's "anxiety for Jane was evident" (72). Later on that evening Bingley commends Elizabeth's care of her sister: "In nursing your sister I am sure you have pleasure. . . and I hope it will be increased by seeing her quite well" (74). The following day Bingley refuses to allow Jane to be moved back to Longbourn out of fear of a return of Jane's cold (78). When Jane is finally well enough to leave her room, Bingley "was full of joy and attention. The first half hour was spent in piling up the fire, lest she should suffer from the change of room; and she removed at his desire to the other side of the fire-place, that she might be farther from the door. He then sat down by her, and talked scarcely to any one else" (90). Bingley is now conscious of Jane's delicacy and his reaction to Jane's presence in the drawing room reinforces the power held by the temporary invalid during courtship.

After Bingley's departure Jane falls into a quiet melancholy that serves to display her refined sensibility as well as her delicate nature. Jane's silent pining for Bingley is perfectly acceptable, by conduct book standards, but her subsequent melancholic

disposition is not. It is clear "that though Jane always struggled to support her spirits, there were periods of dejection" (179). Elizabeth observes that

> Jane was not happy. She still cherished a very tender affection for Bingley. Having never even fancied herself in love before, her regard had all the warmth of a first attachment, and from her age and disposition, greater steadiness than first attachments often boast; and so fervently did she value his remembrance, and prefer him to every other man, that all her good sense, and all her attention to the feelings of her friends, were requisite to check the indulgence of those regrets, which must have been injurious to her own health and tranquillity. (242)

Although Jane's behaviour during Bingley's visit to Netherfield is modest and in perfect accordance with conduct book literature, her subsequent romantic attachment causes her heightened sensibility and performance of delicacy. Jane's performance of sensibility serves to highlight her delicacy to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth is presented as a woman who does not strictly follow the rules for behaviour laid down by the conduct books, and who is uncommonly active and healthy. To walk three miles, "crossing field after field at a quick pace, jumping over stiles and springing over puddles with impatient activity" (70), puts Elizabeth's morality and reputation in jeopardy. While she has a "face glowing with the warmth of exercise" (70), her conduct has gone against the strictures of conduct book literature which dictate that women are more for adornment than work (More 35), and her body deviates from the romanticised ideal of the delicate woman languishing on a sofa.

Although Elizabeth is routinely portrayed as the picture of health against a

backdrop of various invalids, Elizabeth herself must temporarily become an invalid and perform delicacy on two occasions in order to provide the opportunity for further romance with Darcy. Unlike Jane, who falls ill because of the rain, Elizabeth's two lapses into temporary invalidism are caused by disturbing and traumatic revelations which affect her mind, and subsequently manifest themselves as the physiological symptoms of trembling and weakness. It is vital to the plot of the novel that Elizabeth has a headache as a result of learning about Darcy's involvement in separating Bingley from Jane, so that Darcy can find Elizabeth alone in order to propose to her (209-10). Austen uses Elizabeth's temporary invalidism as a plot device once again when Darcy finds Elizabeth in Lambton after she has just learned of Lydia's disappearance with Wickham. Her utter helplessness from her temporary invalidism allows Elizabeth to see Darcy's more sympathetic nature and understand, as a result, that "never had she so honestly felt that she could have loved him as now, when all love must be in vain" (288). At this point in the plot, Darcy becomes the male-protector figure to the helpless female by forcing Wickham to follow through with a marriage to Lydia, thereby saving the rest of her family from further social disgrace (326-30). Her prejudice against Darcy is soon abandoned, allowing Elizabeth to enter into a successful marriage. Elizabeth's illness can be plainly read on her face, which is usually full of energy, as it suddenly becomes pale (286). In this way, her near-constant healthiness provides an excellent contrast for her own temporary invalidism. Both of Elizabeth's bouts of temporary invalidism serve to further her relationship with Darcy by allowing her to perform delicacy.

Mansfield Park's Fanny Price suffers from what appears to be a heightened delicacy and frequently performs disability in order to display her delicacy. While this is

in line with her position in *Mansfield Park* as a moral barometer, Fanny's heightened delicacy also aligns her with the culture of sensibility. Fanny's weakness centres on her inability to perform physical tasks. Walking to Mrs. Norris's and back leaves Fanny physically drained (99). As a result, Fanny rests on sofas and chairs, exhausted and weak (97, 120). This position of delicate sensibility acts as a stimulus for male responsiveness. In other words, Fanny's temporary invalidism heightens both Edmund's and Henry Crawford's awareness of her presence.

Edmund's attention towards Fanny is generally associated with some episode of ill health on Fanny's side. Early in the text, Edmund gives Fanny the use of his horse in order to help her health (64-6), but once Miss Crawford becomes his love interest, he allows Miss Crawford the use of his horse instead (93-5). Fanny is clearly bothered by this usurpation in affections: "she wondered that Edmund should forget her, and felt a pang" (94). But while Miss Crawford boasts to Edmund that "nothing ever fatigues me" (95), Fanny reminds Edmund of her delicacy, stating that "'I am strong enough now to walk very well'" (96). Once Miss Crawford leaves for the evening, Edmund's attention returns to Fanny, who is resting on the sofa (97):

> "Fanny," said Edmund, after looking at her attentively; "I am sure you have the headach [sic] ?"
>
> She could not deny it, but said it was not very bad.
>
> "I can hardly believe you," he replied; "I know your looks too well." (98)

Edmund's reading of Fanny's bodily performance allows him to see her delicacy and sensibility, while Mrs. Norris' decries Fanny as idle and indulgent (97). Edmund

maintains that "his own forgetfulness of her was worse than anything which [his mother and aunt] had done" (100). For Fanny, the revitalization of Edmund's attentions "made her hardly know how to support herself" (100). Her delicacy and heightened sensibility serve to heighten Edmund's attention towards her.

Edmund's attentions are short-lived, however, and he soon abandons Fanny in favour of the robustly healthy Miss Crawford during their walk at Sotherton. Fanny, Edmund, and Miss Crawford pause to rest on a bench, and once again Edmund reads Fanny's delicacy through her bodily performance (119). Rather than pause to take care of Fanny, Edmund leaves her in favour of going on a walk with Miss Crawford. After an hour, Fanny finds Edmund and Miss Crawford: "Fanny's best consolation was in being assured that Edmund had wished for her very much and that he should certainly have come back for her, had she not been tired already" (126). Fanny is convinced that her delicacy and heightened sensibility would be enough to keep her constantly in Edmund's thoughts; however, he is distracted by Miss Crawford, which leads to Fanny's temporary abandonment and further delicacy.

Once Crawford's interest in Fanny is ignited, he worries about Fanny's health just as Edmund did. Unlike the more virtuous Edmund, Crawford uses Fanny's delicacy as a way to further his relationship with her. While Crawford walks around Portsmouth with Fanny, "Fanny was most conveniently in want of rest. Crawford could not have wished her more fatigued or more ready to sit down; but he could have wished her sister away" (405). Fanny's delicacy gives Crawford the opportunity to further his pursuit of her. Crawford's concern for Fanny's health is clear to Fanny herself, and his concern endears him further to her. The narrator remarks on Crawford's moral improvement, stating that

> the wonderful improvement which she still fancied in Mr Crawford, was the nearest to administering comfort of anything within the current of her thoughts. Not considering in how different a circle she had been just seeing him, nor how much might be owing to contrast, she was quite persuaded of his being astonishingly more gentle and regardful of others, than formerly. And if in little things, must it not be so in great? (414)

His attention to her delicacy and to her family changes Fanny's beliefs about the morally-suspect Crawford. The constant attention by Crawford to Fanny's delicacy provides a contrast to Edmund's inattention and also improves Crawford's ability to court Fanny.

The most explicit example of delicacy can be found in the pitiful character of Miss Anne de Bourgh. Her mother, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, adheres strictly to the construct of the "ideal conduct-book gentlewoman" (Sulloway 115). As Anne lacks the necessary feminine accomplishments, she must remain quiet and docile, as was required by conduct book literature, in order to remain eligible for marriage. As Alison Sulloway points outs, such determination to create the ideal woman actually created a

> condition that enlightened modern physicians now often recognize as containing seeds of physical or mental pathology. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Austen created two models of this pathology in girl cousins reared under the same conditions. Readers never hear a single word spoken by Anne de Bourgh, daughter of the autocratic widow Lady Catherine de Bourgh. . . Lady Catherine remarks with an odd pride in her daughter's social pathology, that she is too shy to play the piano in public or make her debut in London. (115)

As a result of Anne's inability to perform, Lady Catherine is determined to display the marriageable worth of her daughter in the only other way possible – that is, to make Anne's delicacy both the excuse for her lack of accomplishments and a sign of her high social class. Undoubtedly the environment in which Anne resides is both mentally and physically disabling; her oppressive mother and nurse consistently infantilize the nearly fully-grown woman. Anne is carried from Rosings Park to Hunsford by "her little phaeton and ponies" (102). The miniaturization of Anne, who is described as "quite a little creature" (185), as well as her mode of transport and Mrs. Jenkinson's constant fussing and attention (189), all contribute to her infantilization. According to the socially inept Collins, she "is unfortunately of a sickly constitution, which has prevented her making that progress in many accomplishments, which she could not otherwise have failed of" (102). Lady Catherine tells her company that Anne would have been proficient at the piano "had her health allowed her to learn" (200), making Anne's invalidism a point of pride and class demarcation. What Lady Catherine fails to realise is that her daughter's permanent invalidism and performance of delicacy prevent her from recovering her full health, thereby disqualifying her from courtship with Darcy. Although her delicacy is clear, Anne's inability to recover makes her unsuitable for marriage, according to the conventions of conduct book literature. Anne's invalidism does not translate into the image of the woman languishing on the sofa due to heightened sensibility, as there is no hope for recovery. Lady Catherine takes the notion developed by the culture of sensibility – that is, the heroine languishing on the sofa – to a ridiculous extreme in order to secure a husband, thereby forcing Anne into permanent rather than temporary invalidism and effectively destroying any chance of marriage with Darcy.

In *Sense and Sensibility*, Marianne is another of Austen's heroines for whom heightened sensibility and delicacy, which cause temporary invalidism, result in successful courtship. Marianne, however, embodies sensibility taken to its dangerous extreme. Marianne consciously makes herself sick, unlike Fanny, whose modest delicacy will not allow her to take sensibility to such an extreme. In indulging her heightened sensibility, Marianne manages to bring herself close to death, capture the interest of two men, and ultimately recover to the point of marriage.

Marianne's body demands to be read as one full of sensibility and delicacy. Any mention of Willoughby "overpowered her in an instant" (114), and she "spent whole hours at the pianoforté alternately singing and crying; her voice often totally suspended by her tears" (115). In London, Marianne is "careless of her appearance" and "without one look of hope, or one expression of pleasure" (198). At the ball, Marianne turns "dreadfully white, and unable to stand, sunk into her chair" (200). Unlike Elinor, who "could exert herself" (45) to control her sensibility in spite of her grief, Marianne's emotions are expressed through her heightened sensibility and subsequently through her body.

Marianne's sensibility is a central feature of *Sense and Sensibility* from the very beginning of the text. Elinor views her sister's sensibility "with concern" (44), but their mother "valued and cherished" Marianne's excessive nature (44):

> [Marianne and Mrs. Dashwood] encouraged each other now in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first, was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was created again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, seeking increases

> of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future. (44-5)

With a nature that actively pursued a heightened sensibility to melancholy, Marianne's depression and illness following Willoughby's abandonment seem a natural effect. Just as with the grief following the death of her father, Marianne voluntarily gives herself to melancholy:

> She was awake the whole night, and she wept the greatest part of it. She got up with an headache, was unable to talk, and unwilling to take any nourishment; giving pain every moment to her mother and sisters, and forbidding all attempt at consolation from either. Her sensibility was potent enough! (115)

Marianne's body performs disability through headaches, crying, and insomnia, and through this performance her heightened delicacy and sensibility are abundantly clear. The danger lies in Marianne's later refusal to stop dwelling on the past.

In London, Marianne's heightened sensibility begins to give way to the chance of serious bodily harm. Following Willoughby's final dismissal of her, Marianne falls into a "nervous faintness" (206). Her depression prompts Colonel Brandon to relate his story of the two Elizas to Elinor (224-29). Shortly after, and as a result of Marianne's self-indulgent sensibility, she falls seriously ill at Cleveland (315). Austen's heroine is dangerously close to the fate of those heroines of the sentimental novel that were repudiated by Austen herself. Marianne's earlier immodest behaviour with Willoughby and her parallel in the story of the two Elizas force the reader to question Marianne's status as a virtuous and redeemable woman.

Through her illness and the subsequent recovery, Marianne is visited regularly by Colonel Brandon. Marianne's lack of mobility allows Brandon to pursue a romantic attachment, much like Fanny's weakness gives an opportunity to Crawford. Marianne's own reflection on her past behaviour allows her to have a greater appreciation for her formerly-dismissed suitor, who performs with a degree of male sensibility:

> His emotion on entering the room, in seeing her altered looks, and in receiving the pale hand which she immediately held out to him, was such, as, in Elinor's conjecture, must arise from something more than affection for Marianne, or the consciousness of its being known to others; and she soon discovered in his melancholy eye and varying complexion as he looked at her sister, the probable recurrence of many past scenes of misery to his mind, brought back by that resemblance between Marianne and Eliza already acknowledged, and now strengthened by the hollow eye, the sickly skin, the posture of reclining weakness, and the warm acknowledgement of peculiar obligation. (345)

Rather than communicating unfettered sensibility, Marianne's body now communicates a more restrained delicacy. Furthermore, her delicacy is sexualized by Brandon, who now has a chance for successful courtship with the recovering invalid. As she sits, weak in a chair, Brandon is given the opportunity to court Marianne, thereby making her delicacy a tool of courtship.

While marriage to an invalid, such as Lady Bertram, is not unknown in Austen's works, numerous heroines suffer temporary invalidism during their various courtships. Through various bodily performances of disability, each heroine's degree of sensibility

and delicacy becomes clear. Although affected sensibility and delicacy are condemned by conduct book writers, the performance of delicacy in order to display sensibility is necessary for courtship. Jane Bennet's performance of delicacy allows Bingley to witness her upper-class sensibility, a sensibility which makes her suitable for courtship. Elizabeth Bennet's headaches allow Darcy to witness her delicacy and sensibility, which provides opportunity for the furthering of their romance. Fanny Price's weakness and delicacy cause her to be attended by two potential suitors, Edmund and Crawford. Not only does her delicacy provide opportunity for courtship with Crawford, but Fanny's delicacy also serves to focus temporarily the energies of Edmund on her rather than Miss Crawford. Anne de Bourgh's performance of delicacy goes to the extreme of debility and effectively takes her out of the marriage market. Her inability to recover from her invalidism disqualifies her from any chance of marriage to Darcy. Finally, Marianne's performance of delicacy and sensibility highlights the dangers of sentimental indulgence. Her near fatal fever at Cleveland provides a morality tale of sorts to those who would ignore the necessary moderation of sentiment yet is also necessary to provide Marianne and Brandon the chance for courtship. The performance of delicacy is necessary for successful courtship to occur, and this delicacy can be performed as temporary invalidism. The temporary invalidism and subsequent availability of Austen's heroines piques the interest of their potential suitors, therefore making disability an essential part of courtship in Austen's texts. The use of disability in the performance of delicacy allows each heroine's sensibility to be displayed during courtship.

Conclusion

In Austen's novels, the performance of disability is essential to the production of modesty and sensibility. Both modesty and sensibility rely upon the performance of delicacy to make them visible to society. The delicacy performed by Austen's heroines based itself in the performance of disability, be it temporary or permanent. The performance of delicacy through disability allows suitors to be visually aware of each heroine's modesty and sensibility. By extension, the performance of disability is essential to the courtships of Austen's heroines.

The culture of propriety is problematic in Austen's novels. Proper ladies need to be modest, which for eighteenth-century moralists was an innate trait, but modesty is essentially invisible; therefore, women needed to perform delicacy in order to appear modest. This is complicated, however, by the fact that women must consciously perform delicacy and therefore modesty, even though modesty was theorized to be innate. The necessary affectation of delicacy in order to prove modesty has been described by Poovey as the "paradox of propriety" (23). Austen's heroines move between the performance and the extreme affectation of delicacy. In examining the performances of Austen's heroines, the affectation of delicacy is clearly seen. More important, the necessity of disability in the production of modesty is also apparent.

Sensibility is a central feature to Austen's courtship narratives. The culture of sensibility requires delicacy to be performed. Since sensibility is a mental process involving nerves, delicacy is needed to prove the existence of sensibility. Sensibility was a desired trait in women; however, affected sensibility was frowned upon. The delicacy required by sensibility is central to Austen's courtship narratives. Each heroine performs

delicacy, becomes a temporary invalid, and recovers in order to complete the courtship. The temporary invalidism of the heroine highlights her delicacy, provides opportunity, and focuses male attention.

This thesis is a starting point for further examinations of disability in Austen's texts as it is clear that there is more analysis to be done with respect to the performance and production of disability in Regency literature. The permanent invalids, specifically Mr. Woodhouse and Mrs. Bennet, need further examination, specifically in terms of their affected delicacy and neurotic hypochondria. It will also be interesting to use the lens of disability theory to re-examine the power held by the permanent invalids, and to compare the examination with the theories of Wiltshire and Herndl. Although work on the body in Austen's texts has been done, a more complete examination of the body and disability still needs to be done and instances of performances of disability outside the courtship narratives should be researched. Further work placing Austen's use of disability in the context of contemporary writers will be useful in order to understand better the importance of disability in Regency literature.

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